



UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Mr. Capra Goes to Washington

Author(s): Michael P. Rogin and Kathleen Moran

Source: *Representations*, No. 84, In Memory of Michael Rogin (Autumn, 2003), pp. 213-248

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176119>

Accessed: 02/07/2010 11:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Representations*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Mr. Capra Goes to Washington

“IF ARISTOPHAENES CAME BACK TODAY,” imagined the West Indian Marxist C. L. R. James shortly after World War II, “he would naturally consider it his business to write for the films to which 95 million people go every week. He would arrange for a great film festival for the coming July 4 as a natural part of the celebrations. Then in the presence of the Chief Executive, the Judiciary, Congress and all the notables, in one theater in Washington, the whole population in the same day at the same time would see his film. It would have in it slapstick, a great deal of plain indecency, but precisely because of the present political situation of democracy, the film would contain the most unbridled blows at American democracy, calling things by their names and naming names as well. He would probably put in the film characters easily recognizable as great personages of the day. He would call corruption corruption, and graft graft. He would not imply that though some were corrupt, on the whole everything was not so bad. He would be bitter beyond belief. He would do all this, however, from the standpoint of a lover of his country.”¹

James had entered the United States in 1938, at the acme of Frank Capra’s reign as “the most successful American movie director during the 1930s,” to quote Thomas Schatz, “whether filmmaking success is measured in terms of box-office revenues, critical and popular acclaim, or Academy statuettes.” James quickly came to recognize Hollywood as “the most striking expression of the tensions and deep crises of American society, occupying a similar relation to the developing society as the writers of 1840–1860 occupied in relation to the America of Webster and Lincoln.” But James nonetheless had overlooked what was exhibited in front of his eyes. For on 17 October 1939, 45 senators, 250 congressmen, and several Supreme Court justices attended the premiere of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* at the capital city’s Constitution Hall. The chief executive and “the whole population” did not attend the opening, but thanks to the motion picture collapse of time and space that, James knew, had created a nationwide mass public, millions of Americans soon followed their leaders into movie palaces around the country. President Roosevelt enjoyed a private screening aboard a battleship a few months later.²

ABSTRACT Frank Capra’s 1939 film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, is often described as a paean to the American populist hero, the patriotic little man who stands up to corruption. But Capra’s so-called little-man trilogy, which includes *Mr. Smith*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *Meet John Doe* (1941), document Capra’s deeply ambivalent view of the people and his investment in the personal power of the media manipulator. / Representations 84 © 2004 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018 pages 213–48. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

Although *Mr. Smith* did not open on Independence Day, it did open with Revolutionary War music, and it named its hero Jefferson Smith after the author of the Declaration of Independence. If its slapstick stopped short of indecency, the motion picture certainly employed humor to call corruption corruption and graft graft. Mobilizing patriotic icons to deliver “unbridled blows at American democracy,” was not the “lover of his country” who directed *Mr. Smith* (aided by scriptwriter, Sidney Buchman, a member of the Communist Party of the United States), the American Aristophaenes for whom the international Communist was calling?³

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is the tale of a patriotic innocent from the American heartland (Jimmy Stewart), head of the Boy Rangers, who finds himself appointed to the United States Senate. What he does not know is that his appointment has been arranged precisely because he is a political naif who doesn't have a clue about the way political deals are made. The senior senator from his home state whom Smith admires (Claude Rains as Senator Joseph Paine) is the tool of Boss Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), the media magnate who runs their state. Taylor and Paine have attached to an appropriations bill a provision to build a dam at Willet Creek that will enrich their supporters. Taylor is also promoting Paine for the presidency, having successfully built his brand image as “The Silver Knight,” the man who fights for the little people. The senator and the boss assign Saunders (Jean Arthur) to control Smith, but when she helps the eager young Smith introduce a boy's camp bill that sets aside that same Willet Creek land, they frame him to make it seem that he himself has a corrupt interest in the real estate. Overmatched, threatened with expulsion from the Senate, and in despair, Smith is on the point of returning home until, in an emotional scene at the Lincoln Memorial, Saunders (having switched allegiances) convinces him to stay and fight. With her help he begins a Senate filibuster, mixing his exposé of the Willet Creek scandal with long passages from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible. Boss Taylor keeps the truth from the people of their state, and the thousands of telegrams he orchestrates condemning Jeff bring the junior senator to the point of collapse. His martyrdom is too much for Senator Paine, however. “Expel me!” he shouts after a failed suicide attempt, and a prostrate Jefferson Smith carries the day as he is carried out of the room.

Mr. Smith's picture of Washington was “bitter beyond belief,” and the “great personages” forced to watch themselves on screen were not pleased by what they saw. House Majority Leader Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley denounced the film. Barkley declared the film “as grotesque as anything I have ever seen!” South Carolina's important Democratic Senator James F. Byrnes told the press, “Here is a picture that is going to the country to tell the people that 95 out of 96 senators are corrupt; that the federal, state, and municipal governments are corrupt; that one corrupt boss can control the press of a state; that the newspapers are corrupt; the radio corrupt; reporters are corrupt; that the trucks will inten-

tionally run down boys in the streets.” Like Byrnes, the State Department worried that, with the outbreak of European war two weeks before *Mr. Smith’s* premiere, the film would “abet the hostile propagandists by ridiculing American democracy.” The Ambassador to England, Joseph P. Kennedy, lobbied to keep Columbia from releasing the film in Europe. Joseph Breen, head of the motion picture industry’s own censorship board, had objected that the original story presented “a general unflattering portrayal of our system of government.” But the people and press outside the capital welcomed *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, as if the reception of this “stirring, patriotic document” exemplified the synthesis of theater and democratic politics for which James was soon to call.⁴

Although Washingtonians did not appreciate Frank Capra’s version of politics, an actor who had made his Hollywood debut two years before *Mr. Smith’s* premiere did. Only one American president deliberately modeled himself on the Frank Capra hero. That actor, who began his career in New Deal Hollywood and ended up in the White House, was Ronald Reagan. The apparently spontaneous line in the New Hampshire 1980 primary debate against George Bush that saved his presidential campaign, “I’m paying for this microphone, Mr. Green,” turned out to be lifted from Capra’s 1948 movie, *State of the Union*.⁵ Once in office, Reagan made the lineage explicit. He defended his economic policy with extended quotations from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and when his nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court ran into opposition, he responded, “You may remember the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, when Jimmy Stewart stands in the well of the Senate and says that lost causes are ‘the only causes worth fighting for. . . . I’m going to stay right here and fight for this lost cause even if this room . . . is filled with lies.’ So will I.” Frances Fitzgerald introduces her history of Ronald Reagan and the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) with several pages on Ronald Reagan as Jefferson Smith.⁶

Whereas Reagan spoke for the political values he had acquired in Cold War America, Capra spoke to New Deal America in the 1930s and later, as the producer of the armed forces *Why We Fight* documentaries, for U.S. values in World War II. Called “Hollywood’s greatest director” in 1938 by *Life* and “the most important figure in motion pictures today” by the *New York Herald Tribune*, and featured on 8 August of that year on the cover of *Time*, Capra was “the most important American director of the 1930s.” But he never made a successful Hollywood film after 1942.⁷ Modeling himself on the Capra hero and on Franklin Roosevelt, was Reagan the legitimate inheritor or the perversion of Frank Capra in particular and New Deal mass politics and culture more generally?⁸ From what point of view is *Mr. Smith* made to castigate Washington politics? To understand the affinity between Frank Capra and Franklin Roosevelt, the Capra film and the New Deal decade, we need to enter the immediate political situation in which, as if taking on the role of the American Aristophanes, Capra put *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* on the screen.

II

Already the recipient of academy awards for *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), Frank Capra was seated at *Mr. Smith's* Washington premiere next to Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler, the "great personage" rumored to be Jefferson Smith's model. Several sources fed into Buchman's screenplay, but they were all filtered through Lewis Foster's Oscar-winning story, "The Gentleman from Montana," a fictionalized account of Senator Wheeler's career. Capra, who had read Foster's tale, thought of Jefferson Smith as "the freshman Senator from Montana"; in the film he is simply "from the West." Freshman Senator Wheeler's exposé of the Harding administration's Teapot Dome oil scandal was the model for Senator Smith's exposé of Boss Jim Taylor's Willet Creek water scandal, and Attorney General Harry Daugherty's effort to frame Senator Wheeler, on the charge that he himself had a corrupt interest in government oil leases, was the model for the comparable frame-up of the innocent Senator Smith. Sounding like Taylor, Daugherty had promised to take care of this "upstart from the sagebrush." Like Taylor, he had arranged for a witness to perjure himself and implicate the senator at his hearing. The 1941 *Life* magazine feature on Wheeler discussed his battle with Daugherty under the subhead "Mr. Smith (Wheeler) goes to Washington." When, decades later, the Senator from Montana's daughter published a memoir of her mother, she titled it *Mrs. Wheeler Goes to Washington*.⁹

Frank Capra and Burton Wheeler were, in 1939, perhaps the two most prominent avatars of the American heartland in Hollywood and Washington, and that one is now remembered and the other forgotten encapsulates the relation between collective screen memory and political amnesia in the contemporary United States. The Sicilian immigrant to Southern California and the Montana lawyer born in New England came together in 1939 in their celebration of provincial America, but the two men had started from different places and were traveling in different directions. Seated in the director's box, the Wheelers registered their disapproval of *Mr. Smith* to the Capras as soon as the lights went up.¹⁰ The Wheeler/Capra intersection on film and in the audience introduces the twin crises of Washington politics and populist Americanism upon which *Mr. Smith* capitalized, and above which it triumphantly rose, but which would come crashing down on both the director and the senator two years later.

Senator Wheeler got his start as a Western radical, defending Butte miners against Anaconda Copper; he was a prominent target and opponent of the red scare during and after World War I, and the first U.S. senator to visit the Soviet Union. "Every economic struggle is a class struggle," Wheeler wrote in the 1920s. He served as Robert La Follette's running mate in the 1924 presidential campaign and belonged in the 1930s to the antimonopoly left wing of the New Deal coalition.

Defending what one historian has called “economic littleness,” Wheeler cosponsored the 1935 Wheeler-Rayburn Act that broke up the giant corporate holding companies.¹¹

Wheeler was the first senator publically to support Franklin Roosevelt for president. He was also suspicious of concentrated government power, however, and broke with FDR in 1937 to lead the successful fight against Roosevelt’s scheme to pack the Supreme Court. That battle turned the president against the Senate, generating his failed effort to purge the body of his enemies, including Wheeler, in 1938. Wheeler featured as a major contender for the Democratic presidential nomination should Roosevelt not seek a third term; he made the cover of *Time* two years after Capra had, six months after *Mr. Smith’s* premiere. By now the Senator from Montana was also leading the fight against Roosevelt’s effort to involve the United States in the European war; against Roosevelt, he supported the Socialist Norman Thomas for president in 1940. But this time his opposition to the president would lead him to challenge Hollywood too, as we shall see, and go down to defeat.¹²

Unlike his role model, who self-destructed in his challenge to the movie capital, the senator “from” Hollywood, Jefferson Smith, emerged victorious in his battle with Washington—first within the film and then against the opening night senatorial audience outraged by its treatment in the motion picture. Audiences wholeheartedly accepted Capra’s own defense of the film, which he said was meant to “idealize American Democracy, not attack it.” Once Mr. Smith’s victory within the film was repeated by *Mr. Smith’s* victory outside it, the motion picture achieved untouchable status. One distributor proposed that it be “compulsory viewing for every citizen.” *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was received, moreover, not simply as “just about the best American patriotic film ever made,” but as an educational source on the workings of American politics. *Photoplay Studies*, which published a series of *Educational and Recreational Guides* for use in junior high and high schools, chose the motion picture for adoption. *Photoplay Guides* normally presented films either based on a real historical event or important historical individual, or else adapted from a famous literary work. *Mr. Smith*, Eric Smoodin has discovered, was one of only two exceptions; the other was *Snow White*.¹³

Featuring Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart on its cover, *Photoplay’s* *Mr. Smith* was partly concerned with political morality (to the question of whether the film gave “a wrong impression of American political life,” the answer was a clear “no”). More importantly, however, the *Guide* treated Capra’s “modern, and successful, fairy tale” (to quote *The Nation’s* words of praise) as a documentary, a political science manual. “Just how does the ‘Boss’ keep his machine oiled and powerful?” asked the New York City Association of Civics Teachers, whose questions were illustrated by “Frank Capra’s Remarkable Representation of the United States Senate.” Visual authenticity, in this associative chain, vouchsafed historical accuracy. Situ-

ated between *The Birth of a Nation* at Hollywood's origins and Ronald Reagan, *JFK*, and *Amistad* in our own time, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was shifting the source of political authority from politics to film.¹⁴

Enthusiasts and detractors alike have seen *Mr. Smith* as an antipolitical film in the sense that it moralizes against the compromises and power relations of political life. Staying on the surface of the film, that view ignores two paradoxes. First, the minus sign in front of politics does not cancel out Capra's subject. Capra is, as Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall write, "the sole major American director to have devoted a major part of his career to the exploration of American political culture." Capra's political turn signals the atypical centrality of politics to American life during the New Deal decade. *Mr. Smith* responds negatively to that political intrusion in the present by invoking the heroes and monuments of the political past, but in so doing it instantiates a second paradox by way of an intrusion of its own. Underneath the apparent war between contemporary politicians and founding fathers, politics and morality, urban sophistication and small-town innocence, the corrupt present and the virtuous past, lies the triumph not of traditional morality (as happens within Capra's film) but the triumph of the modern mass media apparently targeted by the movie. Capra knew what he was doing. The senators and Washington correspondents who savaged *Mr. Smith*, he later wrote, were leveling "an attack against a new, perhaps superior, power invading their empire—"film power." Although Capra, like Wheeler, may seem to choose community over modernity and the little people over institutional centralization, *Mr. Smith* actually resolves those antinomies as Wheeler could not. In spite (or rather, as we shall see, because) of its apotheosis of the people, the medium of Capra's film was also its political message.¹⁵

III

Finding a political message in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* has not proved an easy task. "Populist" is the term of choice, but in the guise of naming the Capra film's political problematic, those who use that label triply avoid it. In the first place, appeals to the people against interests and elites have been so pervasive in American history that the term "populism" covers the widest range of actual political programs; the task is to situate Capra's version alongside the actual political alternatives available in the New Deal decade. Second, accepting Capra at his own populist evaluation substitutes for looking closely at the way that actual popular collectivities are represented in his film. And third, whereas invokers of the populist label make Capra a celebrant of ordinary Americans in the pastoral past, populist appeals often served elite interests from within the heart of modernity—whether emanating from commercial farmers, New Deal administrators, Madison Avenue advertisers, or Hollywood producers. *Mr. Smith* and its sequel, *Meet John Doe*

(1941), locate themselves, so we shall be arguing, inside the modern mass media. Far from assuming a virtuous traditional public opinion that simply needs to be aroused, these films worry that the public is largely “created” by modern media and are reachable only through the questionable techniques of mass media itself.¹⁶

Although *Mr. Smith* and *John Doe* are organized around polarizations, neither film actually chooses sides in their two major battlegrounds—either for or against New Deal political content, either for or against the mass media form. Capra operates as a political filmmaker inside the New Deal order as another and overlapping force field to the one centered in Washington.

Begin with political content. The Popular Front welcomed *Mr. Smith*, and Capra continues to enjoy the reputation of having made “notable progressive films in the 1930s” (to quote the *Daily Worker*).¹⁷ But it is not clear that *Mr. Smith* speaks for Popular Front values or for the New Deal Democratic values. To be sure, Jefferson Smith sits on the majority side of the aisle, which places him in Roosevelt’s and Wheeler’s Democratic Party. And the Democratic Senate establishment that attacked the motion picture could have seen it as endorsing FDR’s attempt to purge his Senate enemies in 1938. Roosevelt was also, like Jeff Smith, breaking with the political boss (Jim Farley, in the case of the president, Jim Taylor in the case of Senator Smith) who had initially sponsored him. Just as Taylor’s newspaper chain went after Smith, so the vast majority of newspapers opposed FDR, with the Roosevelt-hating *Chicago Tribune* slamming Capra’s film. Finally, Jeff’s boys’ camp invoked the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the New Deal’s most popular program.¹⁸

The case for an anti–New Deal reading of the film is even stronger. By 1939 Burton Wheeler was not easily classifiable as pro–New Deal, and neither was his film counterpart. But while Wheeler was criticizing FDR and party patronage from the left, the film senator was arguing from the opposite political pole. Smith refuses to use government taxes to finance his camp (in contrast to the CCC), raising money from his boys instead. No New Deal senator would have filibustered against a relief bill that promised to feed the starving and construct public works. Indeed, Wheeler had actually convinced Roosevelt to build a dam in Valley County, Montana; as he later put it, “when FDR wanted to help a Senator, he built a dam for him.”¹⁹ Standing against deficit spending, big government, the welfare state, and that quintessential New Deal project, the federal dam, Senator Smith sounds more like Reagan than Roosevelt.

Whereas economic royalists and the private corruption of monopolies were the New Deal targets, *Mr. Smith* attacked political corruption, and this after the 1937 depression had refocused New Deal attention on the problem of corporate economic power. New Dealers endorsed trade unions, which are absent from *Mr. Smith*. Senator Wheeler had put himself in physical danger by supporting the Western Federation of Miners and the Industrial Workers of the World, violently repressed

during and after World War I; Jefferson Smith's father was killed standing up not for the mine workers' union but for an individual prospector.²⁰ Indeed, the "syndicate" that went after Smith's father could very well have been a union.

Jeff Smith exemplifies, moreover, the "moral-individualist" approach to politics that Thurman Arnold had attacked in *The Symbols of Government* and *The Folklore of Capitalism*, the books that made him, according to Richard Hofstadter, the most important theorist of the New Deal. Arnold counterposed the moral reformer to the political boss, just as did *Mr. Smith*, but Arnold, the New Dealer, was on the other side. While Arnold defended organized forms of social control, Senator Smith was reverting to the sort of old-fashioned individualism for which Arnold had criticized Senator Wheeler. "The student in government is usually impractical [writes Arnold], because all his acquired learning makes him so. He knows the right principles, and attempts to apply them by the preaching method. He knows no more about the techniques of the organization than the medieval physician knows about the organization of the human body." Arnold could be describing Jeff Smith, and when he continues that "security and order only comes when practical politicians replace learned and idealistic men," he might as well be writing the lines for Senator Paine's defense of Boss Taylor.²¹

And then there is Jefferson's Smith's weapon, the filibuster. La Follette—Wheeler quotes him—had defended the filibuster as "the most useful weapon a liberal minority possessed against a conservative coalition." By 1939, however, Wheeler himself was filibustering against Roosevelt's effort to repeal the Neutrality Act, and most of his isolationist allies were conservatives. Radio news broadcaster H. V. Kaltenborn defends the filibuster within *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* as "democracy in action." Between the production of *Mr. Smith* and its release, however, Kaltenborn was attacking the Neutrality Act filibuster outside the film for frustrating the majority will.²²

The filibuster encapsulates *Mr. Smith's* political indeterminacy. To stage a debate between pro- and anti-New Deal *Mr. Smiths*, as if the winner grasped the film's political key, is to be false both to the political context that generated the film and to the motion picture's actual historical reception. Capra never voted for FDR, after all, while his Popular Front screenwriters Robert Riskin and Sidney Buchman never voted against him.²³ The fight about *Mr. Smith*, like the fight within it, pitted the countryside against the capitol, not the left against the right. Because the battles within the Capra motion picture do not line up with the battles outside it, the film can generate anxiety from within a consensual space, operating inside the New Deal order without speaking for the New Deal.²⁴

The worst crisis in American history since the Civil War had reached stasis a decade after the stock market crash. Like the break between Wheeler and Roosevelt, *Mr. Smith* signifies the stalemate and fragmentation of the New Deal coalition. In the wake of the court-packing fight, the 1937 depression, and the approaching European war, the domestic New Deal was losing force. Jefferson Smith proposes

in that context a return to American roots. Mr. Smith is not the only Capra spokesperson in *Mr. Smith*, however. Although the director has been identified with American innocence, the appeal of his later 1930s films actually lies in their balance between urban sophistication, archetypically represented by mass circulation newspapers and the girl reporters who work for them, and heartland moral virtue. Capra discovered fast pacing, fast talk, modern settings, and up-to-date modes of transportation and communication in his early 1930s films.²⁵ And even when they are morally compromised or villainous, his urban men and women continue to give the later films of that decade their vitality. But Capra made a decisive shift after his breakthrough film, *It Happened One Night*, made him the preeminent Hollywood director. He rediscovered the little people, the residents of the rural heartland, for whom Burton Wheeler had been speaking. Capra is often credited with having invented the country innocent persona that made Harry Langdon a silent picture star in the 1920s. Now Capra would bring back his little man, link him to the people, and give him a social conscience. And looking back from obscurity decades later, the director supplied his own myth of origins for the films of 1936–41.

IV

It Happened One Night (1935) had almost single-handedly invented screwball comedy, the most distinctive genre of the second half of the depression decade. Foreshadowing the reception of *Mr. Smith*, *It Happened One Night*'s extraordinary popular success overwhelmed originally tepid reviews, and the movie won an unprecedented five academy awards. But Capra had broken down, so he later wrote, after this triumph. Ill and unable to work, he was visited by a "little man" who reminded him of his responsibilities by comparing him with Hitler. Hitler's power lay through radio, said the little man, turning up the volume on the one in Capra's bedroom as "that raspy voice came shrieking out of it." But Hitler could only reach fifteen or twenty million people for twenty minutes. "You, sir, you can talk to *hundreds* of millions, for two hours—and in the dark." From then on, wrote Capra, he would "totally commit my talents—few or many—to the service of man. . . . Beginning with *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, my films had to *say* something."²⁶

So the condition of Capra's return to work was that he abandon his own breakthrough genre and use his talent for comedy to make "a series of social-minded films." *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), released the year of the sit-down strikes, introduced the isolated little-man innocent as the Capra hero. He comes to life as Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper), the small-town American who inherits a fortune, and whose new wealth makes him prey to those—beginning with a girl reporter (Jean Arthur)—who want to use him for their own selfish purposes. Confronted by an unemployed farmer, Longfellow decides to give his money to the poor; the response of other claimants to his fortune is to arrange for his commitment to a mental hospi-

tal. As Longfellow withdraws into silent melancholia at the commitment proceedings, and a jury is about to find him insane, the girl reporter's conversion gives him the confidence to speak for his dream.

Reappearing in the other two films of the little-man trilogy, *Mr Smith* and *Meet John Doe*, and in their close variant *You Can't Take It with You*, the character of the small-town innocent seemed to be everything that Capra was not—from physical stature to American origins to absence of personal ambition.²⁷ Just as these films put an anti-Capra as hero on screen, so they rebounded from the direction the Second New Deal and the organization of the industrial working class were taking the United States. As the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the welfare state were finally moving the country forward into the twentieth century, Capra and his Popular Front screenwriters went backwards. It is as if they were offering communal dream worlds to counterbalance ruptured life worlds—life worlds ruptured by sudden success for a Capra who had left his roots behind, and by the Depression and the New Deal order for his audience.

How might one connect traditional American localism to the emerging welfare, warfare, mass entertainment regime?² From one perspective, to invoke the Popular Front slogan, the little-man trilogy was trying to resuscitate a usable American past. From another, however, that offered in Capra's fifth film of 1936–41, *Lost Horizons* (1937), facing political turmoil and “these days of wars and rumors of war,” Capra, Riskin, and Buchman withdrew to utopias of “the meek” that are menaced by malevolent outside forces.²⁸ An impassable Himalayan mountain barrier protects that utopia in *Lost Horizons*; the four films set in America try to find it within the United States. The question answered by Longfellow Deeds's climactic shift at his jury trial from silence to speech organizes each of these five films: Will the endangered space find a sufficiently powerful spokesman?

Here is where the issue gets complicated, for the little-man hero is not born alone; he comes into the world situated between two urban sophisticates inherited and transformed from Capra's earlier movies, the working girl (Jean Arthur or Barbara Stanwyck, sex-changed from her previous incarnation in the reporters played by Robert Williams and Clark Gable) and the big-city newspaper publisher. In all three of Capra's little-man films, the hero (Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart) is pitted against sinister powerful selfish interests (personified in two of the movies by Edward Arnold). The little man converts the girl and defeats the Arnold figure, but his success is paradoxical at its core. Mr. Smith represents the countryside successfully against the capital only from within that other centralized capital, the capital of mass entertainment.²⁹

It is true that as Capra himself once put it, motion pictures are “a big business.” Surely *any* Hollywood film that attempts to speak for *any* disenfranchised group can only do so from within a financial system run by New York bankers/investors and studio producers. But Capra's attempts do not simply demonstrate the structural contradiction inherent in the medium; they thematize it. More than that, in his

little-man films, the power struggle over control of the symbols of American national identity was at the center of the narrative, channeling Popular Front debates about the meaning of “the people” in ’30s political culture.³⁰

Senate opponents of *Mr. Smith* may have sensed that Capra’s film amounted to a challenge to their power. Worried about the Hollywood branch of the culture industry, they immediately revived the administration-supported Neely Bill (named for West Virginia New Deal Democrat Matthew Neely) that aimed to break up the major studios’ block-booking monopoly over production and distribution. “Insiders here look for an early and smashing retaliation for *Mr. Smith*,” wrote the *Detroit News*, with Senate passage “of the Neely anti-block booking bill.” Under studio block booking, complained one critic of *Mr. Smith*, exhibitors could not reject a film “which may offend the sensibilities of the American public”—as if the centralized culture industry were violating local community standards with *Mr. Smith*.³¹

Thurman Arnold, now head of the Anti-Trust Division of the Justice Department, was at the same time challenging the major studios in court. Although *The Folklore of Capitalism* had ridiculed the antimonopoly tradition, Arnold and other New Dealers in the wake of the 1937 depression began to counterpose corporate power to the administrative state. The Hollywood monopoly, moreover, extended beyond political economy to the organizing symbols of collective life. Was the modern culture industry, a huge and powerful organization, hiding behind homespun myths of individualism, as Arnold’s treatment of Hollywood in *The Symbols of Government* would suggest? *Mr. Smith* itself answers that question.³²

V

Starting with Capra’s own assessment, the little-man films have been taken to speak for what Capra called “The Man in the Street,” for the people. The director, who described “the underlying ideas” of his movies as “the Sermon on the Mount,” faced a more formidable challenge—how to unite a multiform, pluralist American audience around the little man’s simple moral cause, how to create the people that Deeds, Smith, and Doe represented.³³ How to make the motion picture, rather than political party or social movement, the vehicle for organizing a mass public? Deliberately exaggerating popular innocence, Capra opens up a space between the people in his movies and the people watching them, a space within which he operates brilliantly to convert his audience to his cause. The result, however, perhaps in spite of itself, invites us to shift our attention from the moral innocent to the media master, a shift that doubles Capra not with Jimmy Stewart/Jefferson Smith (as on the *Photoplay Guide* cover) but with Edward Arnold/Jim Taylor. Or with the figure against whom Capra retrospectively imagined himself reborn, the media manipulator Adolf Hitler.

Although the little-man fable is a late invention, Hitler did become Capra's point of reference by sometime in the late 1930s. "I never cease to thrill at an audience seeing a picture," he told the reporter writing his 1940 *New Yorker* profile. "For two hours you've got 'em. Hitler can't keep 'em that long. You eventually reach even more people than Roosevelt does on the radio."³⁴ But whereas the director presented himself as the answer to Hitler—the role he would soon assume in the *Why We Fight* documentaries—*Mr. Smith* and *John Doe* are taken over by a more troubled intimacy with the master manipulator of popular feeling.

In the decade of "the people's front," the political valence of the symbol of the people may seem to lie on the Left.³⁵ But that association was not unproblematic. The little man himself, introduced into the United States in Hans Falluda's 1932 book, *Little Man, What Now?* was a figure for the anxious petit bourgeois who had turned to Hitler. When on the eve of the Popular Front Kenneth Burke proposed at the 1935 American Writers' Congress that "the people" offered a more positive, inclusive mobilizing slogan for "revolutionary symbolism" than did "the worker," refugee writer Friedrich Wolf pointed out "the similarities between this usage and Hitler's harangue of the *Volk*."³⁶ Thanks to World War II, *Why We Fight* could challenge Hitler head-on. But *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe* occupy the juncture where the dream of the people as the counterforce against the machine of authoritarianism meets the media that created it, and the film medium overwhelms its message.

Frank Capra evokes strong feelings in critics, who are divided between those inspired by what they see as his populist Americanism and those who take Capra as "Capracorn"—as quintessentially American kitsch.³⁷ *Mr. Smith*, however, capitalizes on the latter reaction in order to create the former. Critics who look down on the director from a position of superior sophistication resemble at least a large portion of the audience Capra's films address—an audience suspicious of simple goodness and embarrassed by patriotism, an audience the film works to convert. Beginning with the patriotic music behind the titles, there is deliberate overkill in *Mr. Smith's* initial Americanism. A self-ironizing version of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" follows "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," which plays (knowingly) behind the Columbia Statue-of-Liberty corporate logo. "My Country 'Tis of Thee," rendered so as to strike a discordant note, is the next sound we hear. Equally self-undercutting is the sudden loud cacophony of the John Philip Sousa march "Semper Fidelis" that practically knocks the governor off his feet when he comes to inform Jeff that he is now a senator. The noise turns out to come from a Boy Rangers orchestra rehearsal, in a scene played for comic effect. The "Star Spangled Banquet" that celebrates Jeff's appointment, complete with its gigantic American-flag cake and portraits of Washington and Lincoln, may be taken at face value by the new senator and his boy supporters in the auditorium seats, but the audience watching the film knows that the superpatriotism has been put on to serve the political machine. Up through Jeff's arrival in Washington, Capra orchestrates *Mr. Smith* to

create an amused and slightly condescending distance between the spectator and the screened patriotism.

The “gee whiz” quality of Jeff’s sight of Washington’s monuments continues this distancing effect, qualified only by a virtuoso montage of patriotic sites, as if from the window of the tour bus, that climaxes before the Lincoln Memorial. Calling attention to itself as a stylistically singular moment in the film, the subjectively shot sequence will become, retrospectively, one way to close the distance between the audience and Jeff, between the sense of patriotism as “kid’s stuff” and belief in Jeff’s idealism.³⁸

By the time Jeff finally arrives, hours late, at his Senate office, Capra has bracketed our identification with Smith and joined us firmly with the point of view of Saunders, the “wised-up” senatorial secretary, further unsettling the spectatorial perspective. The film encourages us to laugh at Jeff’s simple patriotism, as Saunders does. Saunders sees Jeff as a simple naive yokel. The fact that he raises pigeons is not an accident—he *is* a pigeon, a fall guy. When the reporters who have set Jeff up to look a fool accuse him of ignorance of how Washington works, he feels they have a point, and so do we.

Popular Front Americanism climaxed unironically in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the montage, as a grizzled black figure standing respectfully beneath Lincoln hears a white boy (helped by an immigrant) read the words of the Gettysburg Address. Capra’s gesture toward racial inclusion will be counterbalanced later in the film, when two handwriting experts testify with foreign accents that Jeff has signed the property deed for the land around Willet Creek, while the one who recognizes the forgery is 100 percent American. But as with pro- versus anti-New Deal interpretations of the film, debating whether *Mr. Smith’s* usable past is progressive or nativist misses the point. What matters is not the content of Jefferson Smith’s patriotism, which remains hazy and unspecified from beginning to end, but that the film will convert us by first keeping its distance from Jeff’s point of view.

Unlike the audience for *Mr. Smith*, moreover, the valorized people within the movie are restricted to American boys and—by way of Jeff’s as the universal stand-in—their mothers. Boys are good in *Mr. Smith*, and men are bad. The “boy senator” presides over the Boy Rangers; the newspaper he edits is “boy’s stuff.” The governor is a political hack, whose sons get him to appoint Jeff. (“Why don’t you listen to your children for a change?” chides the governor’s wife.) The Senate floor is divided between corrupt men, the senators, and sympathetic boy pages, including the “curly-headed page boy” who takes his bill to the presiding officer. “They’ve sent a boy here to do a man’s job,” says Saunders; “The Senator will make a good actor when his voice stops changing,” jokes the presiding vice president. The governor calls Jeff a “big-eyed baby”; Boss Taylor calls Jeff a “drooling infant.” “Listen, son,” says Senator Paine. “You’ve been living in a boy’s world. For heaven’s sake, stay there. This is a man’s world, and you have to check your ideals outside the door, like your rubbers.” The senator from the West may be sitting in the senatorial desk

that once belonged to Daniel Webster, and he may be “Daniel Boone,” as Saunders calls him, but he is also “Daniel in the lions’ den,” alone, with no gun.³⁹

This Huck Finn reduction of moral innocence to childhood has two sorts of consequences in *Mr. Smith*: it makes trouble for the victory of Capra’s populism as message, but it provides the method of media redemption. Thematically the film claims to stand with boys against patriarchs. Thanks to the absence of power that is the price of purity, however, the boy-people cannot save Jeff Smith. “I want to talk to the people of my state,” he exclaims. “When they hear my story, they’ll rise up.” But because the people never get to hear his story, they are manipulated by Jim Taylor to rise up against him. “Would the gentleman be interested in knowing what the people have to say?” asks Senator Paine, dumping the boxes of hostile telegrams in front of him.

To be sure, popular aggression takes the form of telegrams rather than physical bodies. But Capra had already shown he was a master of mob creation in such films as *Rain or Shine* (1930), *American Madness* (1932), and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). Provoked by a strike in one film, creating a bank run in another, making revolution in the third, Capra’s mobs showed the other face of the people, Hitler’s face, fascism. When the “‘little people . . . come together” in a Capra film, as Joseph McBride puts it, they so often “resemble a lynch mob.”⁴⁰ Mr. Smith’s boys remain loyal, if overmatched. But the little people in Capra’s next film, the members of the John Doe clubs, are easily turned by the Edward Arnold character into an anti-John Doe mob. Powerless to incarnate themselves as a force for good en masse, Capra’s people act collectively only as the crowd.

Capra’s alleged populism is thus undercut by his splitting—exaggerated innocence on the one hand, mass aggression on the other. In print Capra celebrated “‘We the People’ . . . to whom weary souls can return again and again to commune and to draw, like Antaeus, another tankful of their courage and faith.” “The people are right, never wrong,” Capra said, but that is not what his films show.⁴¹ Because the good people are beyond political reach in *Mr. Smith*, authorities who are not beyond moral reach make the crucial interventions. To deliver his filibuster, Jeff must be recognized by the vice president, the single and crucial benevolent male face in the Senate; Harry Carey won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar simply for repeating his reassuring smile in scene after scene; it ends the motion picture. The Cheshire cat vice president may be only a shadow of the benevolent patriarchs who preside over the utopias in *Lost Horizons* and *You Can’t Take It with You*, but he has a lot of help.⁴² Once the filibuster is about to fail, Jeff is rescued by the man who was his father’s best friend. Senator Paine chose to rise with the sort of people who killed Jeff’s father, but he cannot finally tolerate being the instrument of destruction of the boy he’s “grown very fond of . . . about like a son.” The guilty patriarch is capable of moral redemption, and since the people who watch his transformation are those in the motion picture audience, not those in the film, Capra has done a better job of crowd control than Jim Taylor; he has beaten Taylor at his own game.

The master manipulator in the film appropriates the symbols of Americanism but fails, while the master manipulator who makes the film succeeds. Speaking for “the little man,” Capra’s investment is in the people only as they are constituted as the audience by his films; “Hitler can’t keep ’em that long.” His “little man” is not a comfortable part of a popular collectivity, but the hero isolated, abandoned by the people and alone, the man who has lost what he needs, the love of the crowd, to survive—Longfellow Deeds silently accepting confinement in an insane asylum, Jeff filibustering in the empty Senate chamber, John Doe about to commit suicide. Richard Griffith has famously described the typical Capra movie as a “fantasy of goodwill” in which “a messianic innocent, not unlike the classic simpletons of literature, pits himself against the forces of entrenched greed. His experience defeats him strategically, but his gallant integrity in the face of temptation calls forth the goodwill of the ‘little people,’ and through their combined protest, he triumphs.” *Mr. Deeds* may fit that formula at the beginning of Capra’s little-man cycle and *Meet John Doe*, more desperately, at the end; among all Capra’s other films there is only one other possible candidate—namely *American Madness*.⁴³ Griffith’s account as a plot summary of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is demonstrably false. The people are powerless to save Smith. Capra’s failed recourse to the people within the film, however, enables his appeal to the people outside it.

VI

Although it presents itself as a film pitting the little man of the people against the political boss, as we have been arguing, what actually drives *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is the question of who gets to constitute, speak for, and control the people. As Charles Wolfe has observed, *Mr. Smith* counterposes the three 1930s dominant mass media forms—radio (Hitler’s and FDR’s instrument), newspapers (William Randolph Hearst’s), and motion pictures—to show the superiority of film. Newspapers, dominated by Jim Taylor, are powerful and evil. Radio, present in the instantly recognizable accents of H. V. Kaltenborn, is well-meaning but impotent. Kaltenborn’s fifteen-minute nightly radio broadcast had made him by 1939 the most famous radio voice in the United States. Reporting Jeff’s filibuster as “democracy in action,” Kaltenborn is the movie’s third redemptive patriarch. Unlike Senator Paine and the vice president, however, he makes nothing happen within the film. When he attempts to speak for Mr. Smith, he cannot reach the people; Taylor’s newspapers overwhelm his radio. Those of us in the film audience are in a different position, however. For us, watching Jeff Smith as we listen to Kaltenborn, the motion picture carries the day. It is Capra, not the radio reporter, who has the power to create mass audience sympathy for Smith by making visible Taylor’s disruption of “democracy in action.”⁴⁴

“Look at the capitol dome. It’s all lit up,” Jeff had exclaimed to a weary Saun-

ders in their car trip around the capital early in the film. Then, seeing another dome, he asks excitedly, "What's that? What's that?" Crestfallen, he answers his own question, "Oh, a movie house." *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* assigns authority to the capitol dome, keeping the motion picture palace invisible. But the dome we are in, not the one we see, is the ultimate source of power. Jim Taylor tried and failed to control Jeff Smith; he is defeated not by Jeff alone but by Jeff, Paine, Kaltenborn, and the vice president, all in the hands of Taylor's double, the film's fifth and definitive patriarchal authority, Frank Capra. Pretending to escape media manipulation into the American heartland, Capra is actually letting the name above the title, his own—he claimed, unconscious of the irony, that *Mr. Deeds* had put it there—off the hook.⁴⁵

Capra does not simply split himself into innocent hero and manipulative villain, stage-managing the innocent from behind the screen. He also puts Jeff's stage manager within the film as the point of audience identification. Jefferson Smith is not by himself after all when he filibusters in the Senate chamber; although he jokes to the presiding officer, "Well, Mr. President, we seem to be alone," there is actually a third person present as the spectator, Saunders cheering him on. By winning over Clarissa Saunders, Jeff simultaneously converts the film audience.

Capra deliberately creates a distance, we have suggested, between the people in the film and the people watching it. In the beginning, he compromises our identification with the boy senator by making Saunders the audience surrogate within the film. We share her cynicism before she ever sees the new senator; when he finally shows up, exclaiming that he'd never "been so thrilled in my life" as when he saw the capitol dome, "and there was Lincoln, just waiting for me," her response is "he's got nothing on me." Of course, Saunders is not the hero of the film, and her conversion is there to help us overcome our initial embarrassment to accept, in Capra's words, "a ringing statement of America's democratic ideals."⁴⁶

Saunders is originally Jeff's unwilling audience, first as he exclaims about the capitol sites in his new office and on their cab ride around Washington, and then when he tells her about his plans for the boys' camp. In the first hinge scene of the film, humoring Jeff over the introduction of his bill, Saunders is moved by Jeff's evocation of the American land. To the music of "Red River Valley," the camera makes us listen to Jeff through the eyes of Saunders, the listener within the film. As her eyes fill with tears in soft-focus closeup, Saunders falls in love with Jefferson Smith and so do we.⁴⁷ From that moment on Mr. Smith takes control of the humor; we begin to laugh with and not at him. When Jeff loses faith in himself after Paine and Taylor frame him on the land corruption charge and the Senate Committee votes to expel him, it is Saunders's faith in him that turns him around. "It's a crime to go through life wisened-up like you and me," she says to her fellow cynic, the reporter Diz (Thomas Mitchell), addressing at the same time the wisened-up cinema-going audience. Won over as Jeff's private audience when they plan the boys' camp bill, Saunders serves as his public audience for the filibuster.

Seated in the Senate gallery, Saunders climaxes her performance not merely as Jeff's audience but also as his director, Capra's surrogate as well as ours. She has played Jeff's director from the moment they meet, first setting him up with the reporters, then helping him to introduce his legislation. "Now there's the principal actor in our little play," she says to Diz when Jeff rises to ask for the Senate floor. Still working for the Taylor machine, Saunders gets Jeff out of the Senate chamber when Paine introduces the Willet Creek bill. (Jealousy over Jeff's infatuation with Senator Paine's daughter motivates her temporary reversion to Taylor's side.) She then tells Jeff the truth about Taylor and Paine, gets him to fight back (at the Lincoln Memorial), and establishes his filibuster strategy. Saunders literally directs Jeff from the gallery, using hand motions to show him what to do, and sends him down written messages of instruction. "I had some pretty good coaching last night," Jeff tells the vice president when he refuses to yield the floor.

Jefferson Smith is what one review, alluding to the 1939 Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland musical, called a "babe in arms"; the *Photoplay Study Guide* repeats the term. Assigned to take care of him in the sinister meaning of that term, Saunders moves to the (good) mother position. "I felt just like a mother sending her boy off to school for the first time," she tells Diz about Jeff introducing the bill she has drafted for him. Jeff knows not to yield the floor once he begins his filibuster because Saunders has helped him with what he calls (to the vice president) his "homework." Jeff has transformed the cynic Saunders into "Clarissa," enticing her to reveal her given name. Although Clarissa will presumably relinquish her working-girl identity, the political innocent she has fallen for will no doubt continue to require strategic direction. Clarissa Saunders offers a maternal love that sees further than her object of desire and supports him from behind the scenes. As director and spectator combined into one, Saunders creates the fiction that the (feminized) audience is in charge.

In the abstract, there is no reason to believe that an innocent hero cannot calculate his own moves and remain pure. Indeed, in another film that came out in 1939, by another director, Jimmy Stewart plays such a hero. Though the boyish sheriff in *Destry Rides Again* refuses to carry a gun, he is actually the shrewd strategist who will ultimately outmaneuver the bad guys all by himself, and turn out in the end to sling the biggest fastest gun. But *Destry* has none of the political pretension of *Mr. Smith*, nor does it need to face up to the problem of its own mythic claims. Capra's film, on the other hand, was about the problem of mythmaking and the power of the media manipulator behind "the people." In her role as supportive "mother," Clarissa was not just window dressing—the obligatory girl in the plot, she is a cover for the director: she is the good Jim Taylor.

No specific political content places *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* within the Popular Front, and Popular Front enthusiasm for the film points to the manifest political limits of that effort to move the United States in a progressive direction.⁴⁸ In its form of popular address, the motion picture also exposes the problematic underside

of Popular Front politics and culture. New Deal agencies, as Philip Selznick showed half a century ago, perfected the technique of covering over elite interests with the language of grassroots democracy.⁴⁹ With populist innocence fronting sophisticated behind-the-scenes direction, Frank Capra and Sidney Buchman also hold a mirror up to Popular Front Stalinism. That problematic looked left in the American 1930s; it formed Reagan as a Hollywood New Dealer. When politics moved into the center of American life once again, the little man fronted for right-wing interests; he sent Reagan to Washington. Mr. Capra would precede him, but only after his next film turned back on the director in self-exposure.

VII

Mr. Smith does not want its audience to see the power behind Mr. Smith; doubling as audience and director, Clarissa Saunders stands in for and obscures Frank Capra. But just as *Mr. Smith* brought to center-screen the media master in the background of *Mr. Deeds*, so Capra's identification with that figure moved ever closer to the surface in the third film of his trilogy, *Meet John Doe*. *Mr. Smith* capitalizes on a self-reflexivity that allies Jefferson Smith with his director. In *Meet John Doe*, however, such self-reflexivity turns the message against the medium, thereby blowing up Capra's project (and his long collaboration with screenwriter Robert Riskin as well).

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington was Capra's last Columbia film. Leaving behind their antagonistic cooperation with Columbia head Harry Cohn, Capra and Riskin set up their own production company. Capra, who supported the attack on Hollywood's block-booking monopoly in distribution, imagined that he could now reach the people directly, without major studio intervention, but his independence may well have had the reverse consequence. No longer insulated from his Jim Taylor identification by the structural homology in which Cohn was to Capra as Taylor to Smith, Capra was now the man in charge.⁵⁰

As the director moved more exclusively into the Edward Arnold position, moreover, World War II was also making it harder to stand with the disenfranchised little man against irresistible power. "Nazi panzers had rolled into Austria and Czechoslovakia" as he was preparing to make *Mr. Smith*, Capra remembered. "The black cloud of war hung over the chancelleries of the world." "The cancerous tumor of war was growing in the body politic, but our reform-happy hero wanted to call the world's attention to the pimple of graft on its nose." Only Capra's own visit to the Lincoln Memorial convinced him it was worth making "a ringing statement of America's democratic ideals."⁵¹

But if *Mr. Smith* could be made under the threat of a world war that had not yet broken out, *John Doe* faced the fall of France and the air war against Britain. In *The Great Dictator* (1940), Charlie Chaplin plays two roles, the Jewish barber and

the great dictator. In the film's conclusion, however, he abandons the little-man persona that has mimicked Hitler to allow the barber, wearing a Nazi uniform and mistaken for the tyrant, to speak out directly against him. The result is to reverse the brilliant mockery of the body of the film and collapse Chaplin into Hitler (rather than the other way around), as the actor is taken over by the great dictator in the name of resisting him. *The Great Dictator* might be seen as one symptom of the little man's terminal illness in the face of World War II; *Meet John Doe* is the other.

Between 1939 and 1941, Hollywood released its first anti-Nazi and prowar films; it also revived the A-movie Western and made a series of pro-British motion pictures, the former in the service of military nationalism, the latter to create sympathy for the contemporary Allied cause. War was the subject of eight of the ten top-grossing films of 1941, all made before Pearl Harbor. Hollywood was preparing the country for military intervention. Mr. Smith's model, Burton Wheeler, now brought to Hollywood his fight to keep the United States out of the European conflict. Leading those who opposed what they accurately saw as a Hollywood/White House alliance, the Senator from Montana responded to FDR's "Arsenal of Democracy" speech by charging that "you and I, 'the man in the street' [have] felt the insidious force of war propaganda through the movies."⁵²

In the tradition of the 1930s American Left, Wheeler worried that American war preparations would promote the emergence of fascism at home. "I am concerned," he insisted, "with the underprivileged, with the economic and social status of those who are ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed." "The American people would like to see the four freedoms established throughout the world, but first they want freedom from want in the United States, first they want freedom of speech and freedom from lynching in Florida."⁵³

Wheeler's antiwar position allied him, however, with isolationist conservatives on the far right of American politics. Whether a Hollywood "monopoly" was putting forth "propaganda . . . designed to influence the public mind in the direction of participation in the European war" was a matter for Senate investigation, according to a resolution referred to the Interstate Commerce Committee. Chair of that committee, Wheeler created a Subcommittee on War Propaganda; it was the first congressional committee to travel to the movie capital to investigate the motion picture business. But whereas the postwar House Committee on Un-American Activities would succeed, with industry cooperation, in instituting a blacklist, this first committee exposed only itself.⁵⁴

The Senate subcommittee's moving force was another old agrarian radical, Gerald Nye of North Dakota, whose 1934 investigation of the role of munitions makers and British propagandists in pushing the United States into World War I had strengthened American isolationism, and who had run on the Third Party Union ticket against FDR in 1936. Immigrants "born abroad" and "interested in foreign causes," Nye charged, listing seventeen Jewish heads of the Big Eight studios, have turned Hollywood into "a raging volcano of war fever." "These men,

with the motion-picture films in their hands, can address 80,000,000 people a week, cunningly and persistently inoculating them with the virus of war fever." The "block booking system" allowed a "handful of men" to "open . . . 17,000 theaters to the idea of war," charged Subcommittee Chair D. Worth Clark of Idaho. The Subcommittee on Propaganda in Motion Pictures and Radio was conjoining *Mr. Smith's* attack on media moguls with the Neely Bill–Arnold antitrust prosecution of the motion picture industry to launch an attack on what they saw as a New Deal/Hollywood conspiracy. Indeed, the senators were up against an alliance of motion picture producers and political leaders, signaled by the presence of Wendell Willkie (Capra's candidate for president, whom FDR had just defeated) as the industry counsel. Wheeler's and Nye's charges of alien influence in the motion picture business, and Nye's anti-Semitic insinuations against Hollywood's Jewish moguls, were finished off by Pearl Harbor.⁵⁵ And that was the sour end not simply of the Senator from Montana's political career, but also of the tradition of agrarian radical opposition to corporate power, big government, and militarist American imperialism.

In the Nye/Wheeler/America First Committee perspective, war propaganda produced state centralization, war profiteers, dead boys, and unemployed returning veterans. For intellectuals like Walter Lippman, World War I propaganda had had an even more corrosive effect, discrediting any faith in a rational and informed mass public. *Meet John Doe* alludes to war as its context; its subject is the phantom public created by the mass media form.

Released the year of the Senate investigation of Hollywood, 1941, *Meet John Doe* exhibited neither Wheeler's commitment to economic and racial equality nor his opposition to American involvement in World War II. But the motion picture moved Capra onto explicitly antifascist terrain. "*Meet John Doe* Pictures a Fascist Putsch in the U.S.A.," headlined the progressive New York newspaper, *PM*. This time Edward Arnold as media villain not only controls a paramilitary organization (modeled on William Pelley's Silver Shirts) but also is using his innocent front man John Doe (Gary Cooper) to engineer a third-party run for the White House. "The meek can only inherit the earth when the John Does start loving their neighbors," John Doe tells his radio audience. "In these days of wars and bombings, its a hopeful sign that [the John Doe clubs] can sweep the country," announces the radio reporter covering their nationwide convention. Counterposing a war-torn world to a paradise of the meek, *Meet John Doe* resituates the *Lost Horizons* utopian possibility within the United States, and thereby finishes it off.⁵⁶ The film imagines against its own intentions an American fascism that speaks not with the angry voices of Gerald Nye and William Pelley, but in the name of average Americans, private charity, and neighborly love.

Meet John Doe's sophisticated working girl (Barbara Stanwyck as Ann Mitchell) is a reporter, like Jean Arthur in *Mr. Deeds*. She dreams up, to save her job and to boost newspaper circulation, the story of a "john doe" who will commit suicide to protest against the state of the world, and then finds an unemployed drifter (Gary

Cooper) to play the role. As the paper's owner, D. B. Norton, turns the plot to his own purposes, John Doe begins to believe in the speeches Ann has written for him. When he refuses at the convention of John Doe clubs to go along with Norton's plan to nominate the magnate for president on a third-party ticket, Norton exposes John Doe's masquerade. Cutting the microphone to prevent John from speaking to the crowd, he easily turns the people against their hero. Only John's threat actually to commit suicide brings, in a last-minute rescue operation, the little people and Norton himself back to his side.

"It could happen here," Bosley Crowther wrote in the *New York Times*, invoking Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel about fascism coming to the United States, "if it were not for the American John Doe." Crowther endorsed Capra's "affection for the plain, unimpressive little people who want reassurance and faith." But the film also met a more bewildered reception than Crowther's, and for good reason.⁵⁷ Making the manipulation of the unsuspecting little man into his subject, Capra intended to counterpose D. B. Norton to his unwitting tool, John Doe. But the film begins with and collapses back into the deeper identity between the two figures. It wants desperately to offer John Doe as the alternative to Norton, but it fails.

If *Mr. Smith* walked a political tightrope, *John Doe* slips off the tightrope into the right wing. Blaming "slimy politics" for unemployment, John targets "politicians" rather than economic royalists or private enterprise. Politicians want to keep people on relief; neighborly love rather than government programs supplies jobs. Only "politicians" cannot join the John Doe clubs, as if it were only the state that was responsible for social stratification, not the economy. Such Wheeler *bêtes noires* as Anaconda Copper and the utility holding companies nowhere appear, neither as the target of the John Doe clubs nor as the malevolent force behind them. Attacking politics and government in the name of private charity, John Doe sounds even more like Reagan and the Bush father and son than did Mr. Deeds or Mr. Smith.⁵⁸

As the film endorses the antigovernment John Doe clubs, however, it places them in D. B. Norton's hands. Which side is it on? Not on the trade union side, since Norton's lieutenants include a "labor leader" who delivers the "labor vote," and no businessmen (though Norton himself is passingly referred to as an oil magnate). The connection between labor and Norton also references the peculiar political circumstances of 1940: United Mine Workers President and CIO founder John L. Lewis, who opposed war preparations and refused to support Roosevelt for a third term, was involved in third-party speculation. The labor boss is anyway peripheral; it is the Norton/Doe symbiosis that goes to the heart of the film.

Meet John Doe wants to separate the John Doe clubs, which preach love, from the political party that stands for hate. In both incarnations, the social movement has nothing in common with the farmer-labor third parties of the 1920s and 1930s. It lacks either the economic radicalism of the 1924 La Follette/Wheeler ticket or the angry redistributive provincial populism that (FDR feared) would have placed Huey Long with Wheeler's support at the head of the 1936 Union Party ticket had

Long not been assassinated. (Nye took his place.) *Meet John Doe* proposes in spite of itself a different danger than a Wheeler/Nye third party, one only realized forty years later in the victory of Ronald Reagan and the death of the New Deal order.

In their (anti)political program, their address to the mass public, and their relationship to the John Doe clubs, John Doe and D. B. Norton mirror one another. So vacuous are John Doe's speeches that they could dress up any political content in little-man populist clothes. The John Doe clubs rally behind their idol when he is Norton's tool; what would protect them from an actor who could play John Doe in front of the camera while operating as (or relying on) a D. B. Norton (or several D. B. Nortons) behind it? Norton tells the John who finally confronts him, "*You're the fake! We believe in what we're doing. You're the one who was paid the thirty pieces of silver!*" as if the transformation of John Doe into another true believer would make him less dangerous.⁵⁹ The film knows better, however, since Norton capitalizes on the public face of John's self-presentation, which would change not at all post-conversion. Politicians worry that John Doe is attacking them on behalf of "the average guys"; Norton sees how Doe's claim, "we're the *people*," can motivate a fascist mass movement. It is as if Capra's declaration of independence from the studio system held out two oppositional possibilities, Norton and Doe, that turned out to be only one.⁶⁰

The problem begins with the address to the people entering the motion picture palace. If *Mr. Smith* subtextually capitalized on the disjunction between the people watching the film and the people in it, *John Doe* explicitly incorporates the one into the other. A huge publicity buildup inviting moviegoers to see themselves in John Doe culminated in front of the motion picture theater. To the headline "John Doe . . . Meet America," a giant cardboard cutout of Gary Cooper as John Doe bent down to greet his audience. One advertisement superimposed John Doe over a map of the United States. In another, a gigantic John Doe silhouette was filled in with line drawings of hundreds of tiny figures, looking like nothing so much as the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. "One Man in a Million! . . . A Million Men in One!" read the headline (ellipsis in the original). And what could it mean that the uniformed "40 members of the Vic McLaglen motorcycle troop" invited to police the crowd at the Los Angeles premiere were "reprising their role as Norton's private storm troopers in the film"?⁶¹

Intended as a paean to John Doe's average Americans, these double-edged massified images are repeated in the film's opening montage, where all the anonymous little people in the motion picture audience are introduced to themselves before they meet John Doe. *Mr. Smith* began by counterposing small-town virtue to modern political vice. *Meet John Doe* opens with a montage in which stock shots of masses of average Americans succeed one another on screen—a crowd viewed from above, men punching time clocks, farmers sewing seed, miners, seamstresses, telephone operators, and so on, ending with West Point cadets marching, children playing, and babies in bassinets. Reminiscent of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (even to finish-

ing off with the babies), this use of the camera as mass instrument wavers between celebration of the popular masses and anxiety about individual identity.

The plot runs *John Doe's* ambivalence about the people through the birth of its hero. *Mr. Smith* may speak, against itself, to the symbiotic relationship between the little man and the culture industry, but small-town, prepubescent, founding-father, and maternal support all sustain Jeff within the motion picture plot. With his political heroes and monuments, Jeff preexists the mass media; Capra's job is to make us believe in him. Far more radical than *Mr. Smith*, *Meet John Doe* deprives the little man of any innocent origins.⁶² Unlike Mr. Deeds or Mr. Smith, the John Doe figure of heartland moral virtue is a sham, a creature of the culture industry within the plot of *Meet John Doe*, as if this film reflected back on, and thereby called into question, Capra's entire little-man project. The question posed by *Meet John Doe* is whether a little-people's movement spawned from within the bowels of the mass media can be transfigured into political innocence. Can John Doe, made into social movement leader through the Hollywood method of playing a role, become what he was only pretending to be?

An amoral drifter, Long John Willoughby, is reborn as John Doe thanks to the bad intercourse between two mass media manipulators, Ann Mitchell and D. B. Norton. In their opening scene together, Edward Arnold as D. B. Norton and Barbara Stanwyck as Ann play sexual attraction. Norton entices Ann into writing speeches for John Doe and when he pays her off with a fur coat and jewels in their climactic scene together, the erotic charge is palpable. Norton is "fascinated by Ann," in the screenplay instructions; for her, his wealth and power are aphrodisiacs. Ann's response to the fur coat sounds like an erotic endearment. She looks at the gift and sighs, "D. B." And when Norton springs what turns out to be a proposal to launch a third party, it almost comes across as an offer of marriage. Stanwyck played a hooker in her first Capra film, *Ladies of Leisure* (1930); it made her a star. In *Forbidden* (1932) and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), Capra cast her as an awakening sexual subject aroused by problematic older men (one married, the other Oriental). Sexual sophistication was an established part of the Stanwyck star persona by decade's end, and although *Meet John Doe* shows us Ann living at home with her mother and younger sisters, Stanwyck plays sexual temptation with Arnold. The film gestures to Norton's nephew Ted Sheldon (Rod LaRocque) as John's romantic rival only to cover up the actual triangle that pits John against the powerful older Norton.⁶³

Ann tells Long John Willoughby early on that she's "actually fallen in love with" "John Doe, the one in the speech" she has written.⁶⁴ Ann surely has created her erotic object, from dreaming up the character, to writing his speeches, to teaching him how to act as if he believed them. But Ann cannot do her work alone. After the opening montage of masses of average Americans at work and play, there are (as Dudley Andrew has observed) three montage effects within the narrative.⁶⁵ Separately prepared by Slavko Vorkapich, they break the classic cinema rule of camera

invisibility to call attention to mass media power. The first montage—in which newspaper headlines, worried politicians, John Doe’s picture, and a graph of rising newspaper circulation all chart John’s growing notoriety—ends on the binoculars of D. B. Norton. In this shot, our first view of the master audience manipulator, he seems to be looking back at us, his target—until Capra cuts to the actual object of Norton’s gaze, the fascist motorcycle gang. Norton has not yet made the John Doe story his own; it is as if this montage puts the idea in his head. In the next scene he and the girl reporter will make their alliance.

The second montage charts the organization of a national social movement—by way of newspaper headlines, moving trains, John speaking, audiences applauding, John Doe clubs organizing, John Doe on the cover of *Time*. (“He made the cover,” announced *Time* shortly before the film premiere, beneath its own cover photo of Gary Cooper as John Doe; news magazine was imitating motion picture.)⁶⁶ This montage finishes off with Norton in front of a map marking the spread of the John Doe clubs to every corner of the United States. The map given to John Doe in movie advertisements turns out to be under D. B. Norton’s control. Both montages insist that what looks like the spontaneous spread of John Doe’s message is actually mass-media orchestrated.

A set of flashbacks constitutes the final montage. Here the camera goes back in time and inward into John Doe’s interior rather than traveling forward and out in space. Confronting John with the key episodes in his confidence game, this montage dissolves into the suicide scene. The mass media create John Doe in the first two montages; the third one unmakes him. *Mr. Smith* counterposed motion pictures to newspapers and radio; *John Doe* collapses the three modern media malevolently together.

Whereas the montages foreground the print and visual media, radio gets pride of place in the story. John’s first radio address marks the narrative’s initial turning point, for the bewildered little man must decide whether to read the speech Ann has written for him or else the one admitting his fraudulence that Norton’s newspaper competitor has supplied. Although John rejects the truth-telling speech, it helps motivate his awkwardness in front of the microphone. The neophyte communicator fumbles incompetently with his phallic technological object; his voice cracks, and it seems that he will not be able to go on. John gradually grows more confident under the sway of Ann’s words. Radio has converted him by the end of the speech, and with him the mass public within the film. Later Ann marvels that John’s radio addresses reach three hundred thousand listeners. Without the microphone, no John Doe; he will be castrated at the convention when Norton’s uniformed thugs cut his wires.

Capra not only insists that the mass media have given birth to John Doe; he also shows the employment of sacred political motifs for nefarious political purposes. From posing John Doe with a midget “symbol of the little people” to playing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” at the John Doe convention, the Norton gang

uses Capra's own Americanism techniques just as had Boss Jim Taylor.⁶⁷ To be sure, *Mr. Smith* also created a hermeneutics of suspicion around the little man the better to convert his audience, but by depriving John Doe of innocent origins, *Meet John Doe* goes decisively further.

The single figure who stands outside mass media Americanism is not the little man but his traveling companion, the Colonel (Walter Brennan). Voicing mistrust of the birth of John Doe from the minute it starts to happen, the Colonel is equally dismissive of the little people who believe in him. The Colonel makes no distinction between John's fraudulence and their sincerity, since both forms of public opinion trap average Americans in dependence; the Colonel calls them "heelots." (The midget is "a half a heelot.") "You're gonna get used to a lotta stuff that's gonna wreck you," the Colonel tells John early on, and he turns out to mean not just money but brotherly love. Reaction shots on Saunders converted the audience to Jeff Smith's boys' camp. By contrast, when a delegation of little people convince John to continue to play his John Doe club role by telling him their good neighbor tales, reaction shots on the Colonel's face undercut the sentimentality. John may be moved by the little people, but "D. B. and Ann . . . exchange victorious glances" (as the screenplay puts it), and the disgusted Colonel pushes through the little people and announces his exit from John's life.⁶⁸

On the evidence of the letters written to Capra, however, as Eric Smoodin has shown, viewers chose the little people and not the Colonel as their point of identification. Taking John Doe back out into the world, they thereby completed the audience circle that had begun by drawing them into the movie. Seeing themselves as John's diegetic audience, spectators imitated the little people who had addressed him within the film. One fan wrote Capra that the director "*had* a John Doe Club right there in the theater." Others reported that the film had started a movement of John Doe clubs around the country (for which there is no further evidence); still others objected to Capra's loss of faith in his "john does," because he depicted them as having lost faith in their leader. Some wanted Capra to lead a John Doe movement, with one letter-writer wishing that the director had ended by speaking in his own voice (like Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*).⁶⁹

On the evidence offered within the motion picture, this audience identification speaks for filmic rather than consumer power. Metamorphosing from passivity to mass-media generated anger and back, the John Doe clubs never constitute a collective popular subject. They stand instead for the power of the figure—is it Norton, John Doe, or Capra himself?—who mobilizes them. One fan wanted to be reassured that Capra's "message" was "sincere. I am hoping you are not a D. B. Norton," she wrote the director. *Mr. Smith's* little men are boys; *John Doe* "infantilizes the common people" as adults. In this "unusually self-reflective . . . narrative," Capra is another Norton using Doe as his front man, and the Capra project could not survive that self-exposure.⁷⁰

When Norton exposes John Doe as a fraud at the convention, his erstwhile

supporters rough him up. “Back to the jungle, you hobo,” shout what the screenplay calls “a group of John Does.” “You’re the hope of the world,” John replies hoarsely before being hit by a tomato. In spite of Capra’s conscious intention, it seems, *Meet John Doe* falls victim to the power of fascism. The “little men” the director was supposed to be celebrating appear en masse only in positions of either helpless, self-effacing gratitude or mob hysteria.⁷¹

“It seems like motion pictures have a terrific hold on me,” Capra mused to Joseph McBride long after he’d lost his hold on motion pictures. “I guess it’s the audience. The audience kept me in there. I had made something and had shown it to people, and they liked it, applauded or something.”⁷² Thanks to audience applause, John Doe comes to believe in the role he is playing, so he tells Ann; the loss of audience leaves him suicidal. Although he now feels the people are “hungry for something,” and thinks he has moved from the selfish need for their applause to the generous desire to solace them, John has himself been “lonely and hungry for something practically all my life.” “He was so all alone!” sobs Ann after Norton and his thugs keep her from the convention.⁷³ John Doe speaks for the lonely crowd, anticipating the social science classic by a decade. Even redeemed, he never acquires Jeff Smith’s humor and intelligence; John Doe is a mass man.

As in *Mr. Smith*, fathers rather than little people rescue the abandoned little man. When the drunken Connell, the cynical editor who turns out to be a patriot after all, finally tells John of Norton’s “fifth column,” he invokes not only Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln but also the father who died alongside him in World War I.⁷⁴ This paternal overkill compressed into a single speech betrays its lack of conviction. Reinstating the virtuous patriarchal origins of which the film has deprived John Doe, Ann’s speeches have been inspired by her dead father’s diary, as if the oedipal triangle with her father and John could overturn the one already established with D. B. Norton.

Placing John Doe between Ann and her father has a disturbing implication of its own, moreover. When Saunders falls in love with Jeff, he is speaking as himself. The soft-focus reaction shot that registers female desire is transferred from Arthur to Stanwyck at the moment John reads Ann’s speech—with the incestuous Pygmalion consequence that Ann falls in love with her own father’s words. John confesses himself to Ann’s mother (Spring Byington) as two people, John Doe and Long John Willoughby, worrying that Ann is only in love with “the one she made up.” Ann and D. B. Norton are John’s fairy-tale parents in that family romance, and John is a split subject.

John himself understands that he is split, but in his fantasy he is not just a fictional character (John Doe) and a “real” person (Long John Willoughby). He recounts to Ann a dream in which he is both Ann’s father (“I dreamed I was your father”) and “the real me, John Doe, er, that is, Long John Willoughby.” Together the two-men-in-one stop Ann from marrying the wrong man, Norton’s nephew. In his dream (a dream as wish if there ever was one) John has chased Ann to the altar

as her father. There he finds Long John playing the minister. John-as-father starts to spank Ann and then invites his Long John double to “come on down here and whack her yourself.” As he is recounting his dream to Ann, John slaps his legs, miming first the father’s blows on Ann’s bottom and then his own, exposing his wish to reintegrate himself by acquiring the paternal inheritance.⁷⁵

This was not the first time that Capra had the hero spank the heroine, thereby returning her to her father. Reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable) spanks Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) in *It Happened One Night* (1935) and calls her a spoiled brat, just like her father had. Peter, who Ellie’s father will ultimately recognize as a “real man,” is the proper inheritor of the father’s mantle. John’s spanking scene, an homage to Peter spanking Ellie, only underlines that John Doe is no Clark Gable. And in spite of his dream, the distance between John and Ann’s dead father is never closed. Though publicists for *Meet John Doe* were effusive about “the healthy young Montanan” who played the hero, nothing in Cooper’s performance could rescue the film from its message.

Stanwyck’s glamour further accentuates John’s helplessness, pushing him more definitively than Jeff Smith into the child position. Ann’s conversion experience must compensate not just for the female cynicism she shares with Saunders, but as well for the sex appeal of the working woman who has given birth to her little man in ambition and libidinal excitement. Since Ann fills the Colonel’s place in John’s life, her commitment to John Doe has also to overcome the Colonel’s doubt. Ann and John have more to atone for than Saunders and Jeff, and so the film subjects them to greater humiliation. Disheveled and slobbering in the climactic suicide scene atop city hall, Ann makes explicit the Jesus Christ imitation. “You don’t have to die to keep the John Doe idea alive! Someone already died for that once! The first John Doe,” she cries, before finally collapsing into an unconscious heap. With Oedipus haunting this film more powerfully than Jesus, however, and D. B. Norton canceling out Ann’s father, neither consummated nor threatened crucifixion can emancipate John Doe from Norton’s shadow. The rush to patriarchy cannot recover from *Meet John Doe*’s fundamental insight, that not a word uttered publically by John Doe gives Norton any trouble at all.

Good fathers and virtuous little people are not *John Doe*’s only casualties. In spite of her self-castigation, humiliation, and reform, Barbara Stanwyck as Ann Mitchell is too much for Gary Cooper as John Doe. Saunders may direct and support Jeff Smith, but John Doe has no existence independent of Ann. The noirish photography of *Meet John Doe* and the camera’s brutal treatment of the repentant strong woman foretell Ann Mitchell’s future; within a very few years Barbara Stanwyck will get her power back by feigning helplessness as *Double Indemnity*’s femme fatale. When Capra’s little man comes on screen for the last time, as George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, he is married to the girl next door. Marking the final appearance of the Capra heroine, Stanwyck will be split in the postwar films into villainous career woman (Angela Lansbury in *State of the Union*) and thoroughly domesticated

wife (*It's a Wonderful Life's* Donna Reed, *State of the Union's* Katharine Hepburn). This submissive helpmeet exemplifies the feminine mystique that the 1930s Capra happy ending may look forward to, but that never appeared on his screen before Pearl Harbor. "Miss Mitchell, do me a favor, will you? Go on out and get married and have a lot o' babies—but stay out of the newspaper business," Connell tells Ann when she elaborates her John Doe scheme. Had Capra's heroines followed that advice, the Capra film would have fallen stillborn.⁷⁶

Audiences may not consciously have recognized the breakdown of the differences *Meet John Doe* was trying to maintain—on the one hand between the mindless appeals to the people made by the little-man hero and those of the fascist who is using him, and on the other between the mass manipulation of the media magnate within the film and that employed by the man behind the camera. But the movie's trouble registered within its plot, for Capra had difficulty extricating a discredited John Doe both from mass abandonment and from Norton's continuing power. Since Gary Cooper as John Doe was inheriting his own boy hero role as Mr. Deeds and Jimmy Stewart's as Mr. Smith, the adversity over which he could not convincingly triumph threatened to pull those American heroes down with him.

Disturbed by the power of fascism to take over the film that was supposed to stand against it, *Meet John Doe* received a mixed critical and popular reception. Capra himself tried to save his movie by blaming its problems on the ending. He explained that he could not find a convincing way to rescue John and Ann from the hole he had dug for them, of stopping John from making good on the girl reporter's scam and killing himself to finish off the film. The director shot several endings, but in none of them did he redeem Doe by having him actually go through with the suicide that had been promised. That ending, Capra said, would leave the blood of the hero "on the souls of the John Does." Capra ultimately chose a version in which a delegation of the people faces down D. B. Norton and stops John Doe from leaping to his death.⁷⁷ Although it formally fulfills the alleged Capra film formula in which the people save their hero, their rush to the rescue neither carries conviction nor saves the film. Capra was rightly unhappy with his unconvincing solution, but far from being a self-contained failure, it is the symptom for the trouble that produced it. The man-in-the-street intervention that fulfills the manifest ideology of this film is fatally undercut by its *mise-en-scène*: irresistible dictator, manipulable masses, boy-innocent overmatched because he has no un-mass-mediated ground.

Not all viewers agreed, to be sure. One fan, having seen the film the very June afternoon she sent her son off to army camp, wrote the director, "What a picture, just what this old world needs." For her *Meet John Doe* was an antidote to worries about the war. The *Variety* review of March 1941, by contrast, saw war mobilization as the antidote to *Meet John Doe*: "An audience stepping outside the theater into an awakened world will find more practical demonstration of the American idea at work in current affairs than in the Capra-Riskin formula," the magazine insisted.

“Its timeliness has been dulled by the course of world events within the past few months. Strong impulses for national unity are loose in the nation today. The real America is rising to the challenge of outside aggressors. Thus the active John Does are proving themselves of sterner material than the film prototype. This is their day for doing, not talking.”⁷⁸

“Outside aggressors” would shortly reinvigorate the United States, but *Variety*’s confidence six months before Pearl Harbor was premature. What rescued Frank Capra was actual American entry into the war, World War II, that the Senator from Montana, Burton Wheeler, committed political suicide in opposing. “Hollywood has been attacked as un-American,” the Justice Department spokesperson Dorothy Donnell wrote Capra while *Meet John Doe* was in postproduction, alluding to House Un-American Activities Committee threats that Congress would investigate the movie capital. And indeed, Senator Wheeler would soon make that threat real. Donnell wanted Capra to speak on the Justice Department radio program *I’m an American*. Accepting Donnell’s invitation, Capra attacked the Hollywood Left (temporarily estranged from Roosevelt, war preparations, and reformist Americanism by the Stalin-Hitler pact) and equivocated on the war. But “the screen’s foremost populist,” as Joseph McBride puts it, removed from Donnell’s script the words “I have a profound faith in the American people. It’s the leaders who need educating.” Virtually at the same time that Capra excised Donnell’s lines from his radio broadcast, he added them to his film. Changing the ending of *Meet John Doe*, he gave editor Connell the final words, “There you are, Norton—the people. Try and lick that.”⁷⁹ The motion picture, Capra seemed to be letting Donnell know, already had.

Meet John Doe may generate a longing for the return of *Mr. Smith*, but (although admirers of *It’s a Wonderful Life* will need convincing) this director could not go back there. Having reached a Hollywood dead end, Frank Capra went to Washington.⁸⁰ The war renewed his genius for making the little people feel good about their country, only now as the men and women in uniform whose enemies were coming at them from outside the United States. To watch the *Why We Fight* “documentaries”—which include footage from film fiction epics and invented men (and women) in the street—is to experience the relief with which, in the struggle between “a free world and a slave world,” Capra could finally give weapons to the fighters for freedom. With slavery as the central verbal metaphor for the Axis powers, and the massacre of innocents as a central visual motif, the series never once has to name those internally divisive issues, the slave past at home and the contemporary extermination of European Jews. Nor did it need to worry about the people as a massified mob; they were now disciplined warriors.

Whereas the political dream of an antistatist localist radicalism died with Burton Wheeler until briefly resurrected by the 1960s New Left, Capra spoke for the American heartland in Washington war propaganda.⁸¹ But as with Wheeler’s political career, Capra’s Hollywood success lay on the other side of the great divide

opened up by the war. By the time the ex-senator and ex-director came together again, in virulent right-wing Cold War anti-Communism, that torch had passed to other senators and moviemakers, and the careers of both were over.⁸²

Looking back over his life, Capra advised filmmakers to “forget all politics. Because if you politicize yourself, what you do is cut yourself in half.” The self-fashioned simulation of Mr. Smith, Ronald Reagan, found the reverse to be true. As he explained in his autobiography, *Where Is the Rest of Me?* Reagan the actor felt that he had been cut in half by his Hollywood career; he was restored by politicizing himself. When he finally came to Washington from Hollywood, having replaced his sophisticated working woman (the actress Jane Wyman) along the way, he overturned the New Deal order that had propelled Frank Capra to the top.⁸³

Notes

Michael worked on this essay in spring 2001, and we had exchanged drafts a few weeks before he died. A number of people commented on an earlier version of this piece. Thanks to Carol Clover and also to the folks in my “Americanist” group for their suggestions and support: Paul Groth, Richard Hutson, Margaretta Lovell, Louise Mozingo, Carolyn Porter, and Chris Rosen.

1. C. L. R. James, *American Civilization*, ed. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 157–58.
2. Thomas Schatz, “Anatomy of a House Director: Capra, Cohn, and Columbia in the 1930s,” in Robert Sklar and Vito Zagarrio, eds., *Frank Capra* (Philadelphia, 1998), 10; Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York, 1992), 412, 419–20; Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (1971; reprint, New York, 1997), 281.
3. James, *American Civilization*, 117.
4. Richard L. Strout, “Now ‘Mr. Capra Goes to Washington’ But the Senators Are Not Amused,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 October 1939, 3; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 401 (Breen quoted), 420–23 (Byrnes and *New York World-Telegram* quoted 421, 422); Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 281–93. Of the films made in 1939, only *Gone with the Wind* took in more money; see Charles J. Maland, *American Visions: The Films of Chaplin, Ford, Capra, and Welles, 1936–1941* (New York, 1977), 266. Byrnes would go on to be briefly a Supreme Court Justice and then Franklin D. Roosevelt’s secretary of state, Barkley to be Harry Truman’s vice president.
5. There was no Mr. Green, either in New Hampshire or in *State of the Union*; since the film line is spoken against a labor boss, Ronald Reagan’s political unconscious was probably making reference to William Green, president of the AFL in 1948 (when the actor was president of the Screen Actors Guild).
6. James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood, From Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York, 1987), 164; Eric Smoodin, “‘Compulsory’ Viewing for Every Citizen: Mr. Smith and the Rhetoric of Reception,” *Cinema Journal* 35 (Winter 1996): 3; Michael Rogin, “Ronald Reagan,” *the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), 7; Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (New York, 2000), 28, 31, 34–37.

7. Schatz, "Anatomy of a House Director"; Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (Berkeley, 1995), 77–82, 269–75 (*Herald Tribune* quoted 80); Charles Wolfe, *Frank Capra: A Guide to References and Sources* (Boston, 1987), 10–12 (*Life* quoted vi); Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York, 1993), 250–53; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 233 (quoted).

The year 1942 is when Capra made *Arsenic and Old Lace*, an adaptation of the successful Broadway play on which the Capra team left less of its trademark than it did on the Broadway play *You Can't Take It with You*. *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is now included in the Capra canon, and both it and *State of the Union* (1948) are obviously continuous with (though also discontinuous from) the films from 1930–1941. No postwar Capra film upon its release combined critical, popular, and financial success, and most were such failures on at least two of those dimensions that Capra was driven from Hollywood.

The Capra film of the New Deal decade is a collective product of the Hollywood studio system. Although "Capra" is certainly more than a placeholder for the author function, the Capra film is unimaginable without, in particular, the contributions of cameraman Joseph Walker and screenwriters Robert Riskin and Sidney Buchman. The best discussions are, on the Hollywood studio system, Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, 1988), and for Capra, McBride, *Frank Capra*, and Wolfe, *Frank Capra*, 1–36.

8. For the debate over continuities and discontinuities between Roosevelt and Capra, and Reagan, compare Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York, 1990), to Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow* (Chicago, 2000), and see Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," *the Movie*. The argument is foreshadowed in the New York intellectuals' early Cold War attack on Popular Front culture; see Robert Warshaw, *The Immediate Experience* (New York, 1962), and Leslie Fiedler, *An End to Innocence* (Boston, 1955), and the response in Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York, 1989). On Roosevelt as Reagan's model, see Michael Rogin and William Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt*.
9. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 254–55, 281; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 401–11, 419; Burton K. Wheeler with Paul F. Healy, *Yankee from the West* (Garden City, N.Y., 1962), 212–41; "Boss Isolationist: Burton K. Wheeler," *Life* 10, 19 May 1941, 112; Elizabeth Wheeler Colman, *Mrs. Wheeler Goes to Washington* (Helena, Mont., 1989) (Daugherty quoted 83). McBride denies that Wheeler was Smith's original, but he cites no evidence. No doubt intending to invoke Jefferson Smith's Senate filibuster, Wheeler's daughter quotes the *Kansas City Star's* front page 1924 description of her father's indictment of the Harding administration (97): "The Montana Senator is tall and blond. There is a suggestion of pioneer gauntness about his jaw and deep set eyes. He spoke in a low tone with nervous intensity, pacing back and forth as he told the story of corruption in the nation's capital."

Lewis Foster's "The Gentleman from Montana" has disappeared, but it apparently filtered Wheeler's life through two literary sources, William A. Brady and Joseph R. Grisner's 1909 play *The Gentleman from Mississippi* (New York, 1909) and Maxwell Anderson's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1933 play, *Both Your Houses* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1933). Anderson also wrote the screenplay for *Washington Merry-Go-Round* (1932), whose theme, plot, and hero's nocturnal visit to the Lincoln Memorial all anticipate *Mr. Smith*; see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 402–4.

10. Strout, "Now 'Mr. Capra Goes to Washington,'" 3; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 282, 287. A major figure in the Senate by 1939, Wheeler was among the senators who

objected to the film's depiction of that institution. Mrs. Wheeler, a straightlaced teetotaler who disapproved of Eleanor Roosevelt, was the very opposite of Clarissa Saunders. It was she and her daughter, Capra reports, who during Jeff's filibuster "withered us with hostile glances, then whispered into Senator Wheeler's ear."

11. Richard A. Neuberger, "Wheeler of Montana," *Harpers* 180, May 1940, 609–18; Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), 178 (quoted), 306–7 (quoted).
 12. Neuberger, "Wheeler of Montana," 609–18; Hamilton Basso, "Burton the Bronc," *New Republic* 102, 27 April 1940, 527–30; "The Presidency," *Time* 34, 9 October 1939, 11–12; "National Affairs," *Time* 35, 15 April 1940, cover, 21–22; "Evolution of a Senator," *Time* 35, 24 June 1940, 15–16; Colman, *Mrs. Wheeler Goes to Washington*, 185; Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 26.
 13. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 424 (quoting James Hilton); Smoodin, "'Compulsory' Viewing for Every Citizen."
 14. "A Guide to the Appreciation of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*," *Photoplay Studies* 5 (1939): 3, 7–10; Franz Huellering, "Films," *Nation* 149, 28 October 1939, 476–77.
 15. *New Yorker* review of *Primary Colors*; Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall, "Frank Capra Meets John Doe," in Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, eds., *Cinema and Nation* (London, 2000), 32; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 283.
 16. For Capra as populist see Jeffrey Richards, "Frank Capra and the Cinema of Populism," *Film Society Review* 7 (February 1972): 39–46, (March–April–May 1972): 60–70; Joyce Nelson, "*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*: Capra, Populism, and Comic-Strip Art," *Journal of Popular Film* 3 (Summer 1974): 245–56; Glenn Alan Phelps, "The 'Populist' Films of Frank Capra," *American Studies* 13, no. 3 (1979): 325–42; Morris Dickstein, "The People vs. Frank Capra: Populism in Popular Culture," *CUNY English Forum* 1 (1985): 23–44; Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 27–37. Robert Riskin, Capra's screenwriter for all Capra's films from 1934 to 1941 except *Mr. Smith*, hated the term "populism"; see Pat McGilligan, "Introduction," in Robert Riskin, *Six Screenplays*, ed. Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, 1997), xiv.
- "Populist" interpretations of Capra suffer from their invocations of Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), since Hofstadter was stigmatizing the radical populist movement of 1887–96 in order to counterpose populism to a supposedly pragmatic New Deal. Both terms of his antinomy are problematic. The paragraph in the text reprises the critique of Hofstadter made in Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). For the phantom public, see Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public* (New York, 1930).
17. *Daily Worker* quoted in McBride, *Frank Capra*, 581. McBride himself brilliantly analyzes Capra's collaboration with his Popular Front screenwriters but persists in finding the resulting films more "disturbing to the status quo" than they were, and quoting others (e.g., Peter Bogdanovich, Constantin Costa-Gavras) in support of that view; see 628 (quoted), 631–32, 635.
 18. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 410, 420.
 19. Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 305.
 20. *Ibid.*, 116–40. Dashiell Hammett's first Sam Spade novel, *Red Harvest*, is set in Butte, and its violence is explicitly the inheritance of the violent working-class defeat. Hammett was, of course, a Hollywood leftist in the 1930s and 1940s.
 21. Thurman Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, 1937), 233, 86–87, 92. For another take, see Giuliana Muscio, "Roosevelt, Arnold, and Capra, (or) the Federalist-Populist Paradox," in Sklar and Zagarrío, *Frank Capra*, 164–89.

22. Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 269; Charles Wolfe, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: Democratic Forums and Representational Forms," in Peter Lehman, ed., *Close Viewings* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1990), 321–24.
23. On the politics of the Capra/Riskin collaboration and Capra's anti-New Deal political opinions, see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 233–39, 253–63, 408–9.
24. *American Madness*, made just before Capra's breakthrough, is in part an exception to this rule, although not in its reception. The film was taken to be pro-banker in general; financed by A. P. Giannini's Bank of America, however, it was actually siding with proto-New Deal loose money bankers from the hinterland against tight-money Wall Street; see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 249–53.
25. Compare Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 139–40, and Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1973), 264–67.
26. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 173–76, 182–85. James Harvey's splendid book, *Romantic Comedy in America from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York, 1987), 108, 153–54, first alerted us to the importance of this story. A Capra script, it is an invention that mixes together the burst appendix that nearly killed him with the director's anxiety over whether he could stay at the top after the success of *It Happened One Night*. By the time he twinned himself against Hitler, Capra had not only produced the *Why We Fight* World War II propaganda films; he also knew that *It Happened One Night* was one of Hitler's favorite films; see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 317–24, 443, and Bennet Schaber, "Hitler Can't Keep 'Em That Long': The Road, the People," in Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London, 1997), 17–19. On *Night's* reception, see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 308–9, and Maland, *American Visions*, 197.
27. This is the thesis of McBride, *Frank Capra*, whose linkages between Capra's life, work, and mythmaking about both have influenced us throughout.
28. Robert Riskin, *Lost Horizons*, in Pat McGilligan, ed., *Six Screenplays by Robert Riskin* (Berkeley, 1997), 471, 533.
29. Compare Wolfe, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: Democratic Forums and Representational Forms," 308–9.
30. Frank Capra, "A Sick Dog Tells Where it Hurts," *Esquire*, January 1936, 87. On the importance of the rhetoric of "the people" in the 1930s, see Susman, *Culture as History*, 211–14.
31. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 420–24 (quote 420); Frank S. Nugent, "Capra's Capitol Offense," *New York Times*, 29 October 1939, 5; Eric Smoodin, "'Compulsory' Viewing for Every Citizen"; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 288 (quoting *Detroit News*); Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin, "'What's the Matter with Capra?' *Sullivan's Travels* and the Popular Front," *Representations* 71 (Summer 2000); Maland, *American Visions*, 267. Further to complicate Hollywood/New Deal alliances, although New Dealers initially took *Mr. Smith* as an example of motion picture monopoly power, Capra himself also opposed the practice of block booking.
32. Compare Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia, 1997); Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism*, 207–29; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1995).
33. Capra quoted in McBride, *Frank Capra*, 238. *L'homme dans la rue* is the French title for *Meet John Doe*; Geoffrey T. Hellman, "Profiles: Thinker in Hollywood," *New Yorker* 16, 24 February 1940, 23.
34. Hellman, "Thinker in Hollywood," 23–28, quoted in McBride, *Frank Capra*, 432.
35. Warren Susman argues that Popular Front culture remained largely middle class and

- conservative, in spite of its populist rhetoric; *Culture as History*, 150–229. Michael Denning insists that this analysis ignores the powerful popular culture created by the laboring women and men of the CIO, and does not adequately acknowledge the populist rhetoric of various authoritarian movements on the right. He agrees, however, with Susman that Capra films, along with FDR’s fireside chats, best represent some official populist mainstream; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), 123–59. Our point is to understand just what constituted this mainstream populism.
36. Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London, 1992), 40–46; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 408–15; Leonard Quart, “Frank Capra and the Popular Front,” *Cineaste* 8 (Summer 1977): 6–7; Hellman, “Thinker in Hollywood,” 23–28; Kenneth Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” in Waldo Frank, ed., *American Writers’ Congress* (London, 1935), 88–89; “Thirty Years Later,” *American Scholar* 35 (Summer 1966): 506.
 37. For persuasive examples of both views, see Morris Dickstein, “The People Versus Frank Capra: Populism in Popular Culture,” in Sklar and Zaggarro, *Frank Capra*; and Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 139–66.
 38. Capra reported that his morale had been lifted by his own visit to the Lincoln Memorial while he was filming *Mr. Smith*. Worrying that his movie was “untimely” given the “cancerous tumor of war . . . growing in the body politic,” Capra left the Lincoln Memorial with the conviction that the people of the world needed “a ringing statement of America’s ideal. The soul of our film would be anchored in Lincoln”; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 259–60.
 39. Dialogue from *Mr. Smith* is quoted from the film.
 40. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 164.
 41. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 240; Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 142.
 42. Since Wheeler reports a benevolent vice president above him during one of his Senate filibusters, either the film is borrowing from life or Wheeler’s memory is filtered through the film; see Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 289. On benevolent patriarchs, see Wolfe, *Frank Capra*, 22.
 43. *American Madness* (1932), in which the common people show their faith in a populist banker by depositing their money in his institution, is, I believe, the only other Capra film to fit the Richard Griffith formula. See the discussion in McBride, *Frank Capra*, 247–54. Griffith is quoted on 163. Compare Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 153–63.
 44. Compare Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 140–64; Wolfe, “*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*: Democratic Forums and Representational Forms,” 321–24.
 45. Capra boasted that his film celebrating the little man had raised him above the crowd. Like the little-man/Hitler story, Capra’s assertion that his name appears above the title in *Mr. Deeds* is symptomatic and false; see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 330.
 46. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 260.
 47. Compare Stephen Handzo, “Under Capracorn: A Decade of Good Deeds and Wonderful Lives,” *Film Comment* (Nov./Dec. 1972): 9; and Nelson, “*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*: Capra, Populism, and Comic-Strip Art,” 251–52.
 48. See Quart, “Frank Capra and the Popular Front.”
 49. See Philip Selznick, *T. V. A. and the Grass Roots* (Berkeley, 1966), and Grant McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy* (Berkeley, 1977).
 50. Compare Wolfe, “Biographical Background,” in Wolfe, *Frank Capra*, 4–5; and Nick Browne, “System of Production/System of Distribution: Industry Context and Ideological Form in Capra’s *Meet John Doe*,” in Charles Wolfe, ed., *Meet John Doe* (New Brunswick, 1989), 269–90. On the Capra/Cohn relation, and the Capra/Riskin relation in

Meet John Doe, see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 273–77, 431–33, 440–41. McBride argues (433) that the film put Capra in John Doe’s position (rather than that of the Edward Arnold character) by exposing his dependence on Riskin, the man who wrote his lines. We will argue for both identifications.

51. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 259–60.
52. Maland, *American Visions*, 29; Burton K. Wheeler, “America’s Present Emergency,” *Vital Speeches* 7 (31 December 1940): 205.
53. Burton K. Wheeler, “Unity for Peace,” 30 March 1941, “The American People Want No War,” in *Vital Speeches* 7 (23 May 1941): 448, 489.
54. Hearings of the Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate Commerce, 9–26 September 1941, *Propaganda in Motion Pictures* (Washington, D.C., 1941), 1, 2; “Hollywood in Washington,” *Time* 38, 22 September 1941, 13–14; Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley, 1983), 159–60; Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley, 1987), 19–47.
55. Gerald Nye, “War Propaganda,” in *Vital Speeches* 8 (1 August 1941): 720–23 (quoted 721); Gerald Nye, Senate speech, 6 October 1941, in *Congressional Record*, vol. 87 (77th Congress, First Session), 7625–30 (quoted 7628); Muscio, *Hollywood’s New Deal*, 137–40 (Worth quoted 137). Unlike Nye, Wheeler steered clear of anti-Semitism, but he supported a Montana congressional candidate in 1938 (against the New Deal incumbent) who became the most virulent anti-Semite in the House of Representatives; see *Time*, 22 September 1941, 13; Neuberger, “Wheeler of Montana,” 617–18.
56. Pat McGilligan, “Introduction,” and Robert Riskin, *Meet John Doe*, in *Six Screenplays*, lvii (quoting *PM*), 630, 657; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 297.
57. Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, 13 March 1941, 25. On *Meet John Doe*’s reception, see McGilligan, “Introduction,” lviii; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 436; Charles Wolfe, “Reviews,” in Wolfe, *Meet John Doe*, 218.
58. Riskin, “Meet John Doe,” 582, 623, 642, 666, 668.
59. *Ibid.*, 671.
60. *Ibid.*, 628. It is from this point of view that the former 1930s Hollywood Communists Robert Rossen, Elia Kazan, and Budd Schulberg made their variations on *Meet John Doe*: *All the King’s Men* (Rossen, 1949) and *A Face in the Crowd* (Kazan and Schulberg, 1955). The latter, referencing the little-man trilogy from the moment the girl radio reporter opens the film, is a detailed answer to Capra’s films. Like *Meet John Doe*, these movies by ex-Popular Fronters imagine an American fascism; our references to Ronald Reagan as the historical John Doe are meant not to call fascist this New Deal actor-become-president, but rather to notice the political and motion-picture inheritance that produced him.
61. Charles Wolfe, “Meet John Doe: Authors, Audiences, and Endings,” in Wolfe, *Meet John Doe*, 20–22; Eric Smoodin, “‘This Business of America’: Fan Mail, Film Reception, and *Meet John Doe*,” *Screen* 36 (Summer 1996): 121 (quoted on storm troopers).
62. Compare Richard Glatzer, “*Meet John Doe*: An End to Social Mythmaking,” in Wolfe, *Meet John Doe*, 246. As Capra puts it in his autobiography, “We had abandoned our usual formula—a sane, honest ‘man of the people,’ thrust into a confrontation with the forces of evil, wins out with his innate goodness. This time our hero was a bindle stiff, a drifting piece of human flotsam as devoid of ideals as he was of change in his pocket”; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 303.
63. Capra also starred Stanwyck in *The Miracle Woman* (1931, from a Broadway play by Riskin), whose plot and romantic triangle foreshadow *Meet John Doe*. The director him-

self had been in love with, and ultimately turned down by, Stanwyck in the early 1930s; see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 209–17, 228–29; Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 115–16, 129–31.

64. Riskin, *Meet John Doe*, 622.
65. Compare Dudley Andrew, “*Meet John Doe*,” *Enclitic* 5 (Fall 1981–Spring 1982): 114–15 (also in Wolfe, *Meet John Doe*, 253–68). We are greatly indebted to Andrew’s analysis of the montage sequences and of the movie as a whole (111–19), although he will probably think we have turned him upside down.
66. “Gary Cooper–John Doe” and “Coop,” *Time*, 3 March 1941, cover, 78–82; Smoodin, “‘This Business of America,’” 118.
67. Riskin, *Meet John Doe*, 623. 68. *Ibid.*, 644.
69. Smoodin, “‘This Business of America,’” 122–25. Although Smoodin comes to the opposite conclusions from ours, his essay is indispensable to any reading of *Meet John Doe*.
70. Compare Smoodin, “‘This Business of America’” (fan quoted 117); Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 140–42; F. Stricker, “Repressing the Working Class: Individualism and the Masses in Frank Capra Films,” *Labor History* (Fall 1990): 455–66 (quoted 465); McBride, *Frank Capra*, 430–33 (quoted 432); Andrew, “*Meet John Doe*,” 114–16; Lindholm and Hall, “Frank Capra Meets John Doe,” 35; Wolfe, “*Meet John Doe*,” 27.
71. Riskin, *Meet John Doe*, 682–83.
72. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 655.
73. Riskin, *Meet John Doe*, 654, 684. 74. *Ibid.*, 664. 75. *Ibid.*, 650–53.
76. *Ibid.*, 591; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 537.
77. Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 304–5. On the different endings, see Wolfe, “*Meet John Doe*,” 10–12.
78. Smoodin, “‘This Business of America,’” 111; *Variety*, 19 March 1941.
79. McBride, *Frank Capra*, 436–39.
80. Compare Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 314–15.
81. Idaho Senator Frank Church, among the leading Senate opponents of the Vietnam War, and chair of the Senate committee that exposed the secret government of the military industrial complex, explicitly took as his hero Wheeler’s ally and his own Idaho predecessor, Senator William E. Borah. Church denied that Borah was an isolationist. In words that would have cheered the Wheeler and the Borah of the 1930s, he celebrated Borah’s “reluctance to use force, his anti-imperialism, and his toleration for diversity in the world at large.” Mike Mansfield of Wheeler’s own state and George McGovern of neighboring South Dakota also revived the northwestern agrarian radical heritage in their opposition to the war; see Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent into Vietnam* (New York, 2001), Church quoted 13.
82. On Capra’s post–World War II politics, filmmaking, and mythmaking about his own career, see McBride, *Frank Capra*, 503–666.
83. *Ibid.*, 635. Jane Wyman had actually divorced Reagan; see Rogin, “*Ronald Reagan*,” *the Movie*, 25–27.