

I will not yield: cultural
values in mr. smith
goes to washington



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Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) tells the story of an idealistic young man from an unnamed Western state, Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), who is unexpectedly elected to the United States Senate. Smith attempts to do right by his position and pass a meaningful bill but is faced with the reality that Washington is often more focused on money than principles. The film's release in 1939 places it in the Golden Age of Order, a time during which the content of films was restricted by the Motion Picture Production Code and their narratives were required to promote positive values and condemn negative ones. Capra did this in all of his films, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was no exception. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* affirms patriotism and the value of hard work while it criticizes political corruption and the belief that women do not belong in politics.

Patriotism is one of the major values that are affirmed in Capra's film. When Smith is first selected for appointment to the Senate, Governor Hubert Hopper (Guy Kibbee) cites his wholesome American image as the head of the Boy Rangers and the man who saved Sweetwater from a wildfire. When discussing how easy the naïve appointee will be to manipulate, Hopper calls Smith "a big-eyed patriot [who] knows Lincoln and Washington by heart [and] stands at attention in the governor's presence." Smith's patriotism is further emphasized when he escapes his fellow politicians to visit the Lincoln Memorial immediately upon arriving in Washington, D. C. and when he decides to go up to Mount Vernon before his first Senate session the next day. In a meeting with Joseph Paine (Claude Rains), the incumbent senator from his state, Smith expresses his respect for American governmental institutions and his mentor. Smith also loves the natural beauty of his

country, which he describes to his secretary, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur) as “ prairies and wind leading through the tall grass.” This love of his land is what pushes Smith to introduce his bill for a national boys’ camp, and his value of his country above himself is what keeps him fighting for the bill in the face of adversity. Smith’s patriotism is not the only positive cultural value emphasized in this film.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington also celebrates the value of hard work. Although Smith’s hard work is most powerfully exemplified by the climactic filibuster scene, it is demonstrated throughout Smith’s character arc. Hard work is at the root of the patriot’s story as a man who tirelessly gives his time to others, from his job leading the Boy Rangers and their newspaper to his volunteer firefighting. In his first week as a senator, Smith works with Saunders to write a bill, and even as she addresses all of the things that could go wrong, he insists on going through with it. They order food in and stay up all night to complete the bill before the next day’s session. The most extreme example of Smith’s hard work is his longer than 23-hour filibuster in the Senate chambers. Talking for so long causes him to become physically weak, barely able to stand, and his voice turns hoarse and shaky. When he finally finishes speaking, Smith has worked so hard and is so physically exhausted that he collapses to the floor. Patriotism and hard work are some of the values exemplified by the film’s characters, but others are challenged in the narrative.

This film not only affirms positive cultural values, but it also criticizes negative facets of American culture. One of these is the corruption of political machines. Smith’s state has a particularly controlling machine, <https://assignbuster.com/i-will-not-yield-cultural-values-in-mr-smith-goes-to-washington/>

which is evident even from the outset of the film before all of its corruption is revealed. When the incumbent senator dies, the governor seeks the council of his inner circle to select a new senator rather than turning the issue to a statewide election. When Smith refused to bend to the will of the machine, Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), one of the political bosses, becomes threatening, saying, " Either he falls in line with us and learns to behave himself or I'll break him so wide open they'll never be able to find the pieces." When Smith expresses his discontentment about the politicians using the Willet Creek property for their own personal gains, Paine explains that there is nothing that he can do about it and that " that's just the way things are" in Washington. When addressing the Senate, Smith says that Taylor " controls a political machine and everything else worth controlling in this state." The men take advantage of Smith's kindness and naivety, asking him to yield his time only to spread lies about him and call for his removal from the Senate. However, in the end, it is Smith who comes out victorious as Paine succumbs to his guilt and reveals their corruption, leaving the audience with a message about the dangers of political machines.

Another value that Capra challenges is a traditional view of the role of women, particularly that they do not belong in politics. Saunders is an excellent example of a woman who challenges societal norms constantly throughout the film. She works as Smith's secretary but knows that she is capable of more, telling her superior that she " wasn't given a brain just to tell a Boy Ranger what time it is." Saunders has goals, wants to earn money, and only stays on as the " foolish" Smith's secretary because she is promised a promotion. She ends up being invaluable to Smith, however, as

she knows far more about politics than he does. She points out all of the potential flaws in Smith's bill-writing plan as he attempts to write his first bill overnight. She is realistic about what committees are, that a senate "convenes" when it meets, and what could go wrong in the process of presenting a bill because she understands the process inside and out. However, she supports Smith even when she finds him to be unprofessional and naïve. Saunders deals with many instances of being underestimated and treated more poorly than her male superiors (she tells Smith that she "answers to whistles"), but she is the driving force behind Smith's filibuster and exposing the truth about the political machine. She signals to him from the gallery to read the portion of the code that allows him to speak indefinitely and bring the other senators back in, as well as telling him not to stop the session for a recess. Although the prevailing opinion at the time, which is illustrated by the all-male Senate, was that women did not belong in politics, Saunders' character criticizes this belief.

In summary, there are as many as dozens of cultural values that are affirmed and challenged in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. However, patriotism and the value of hard work are especially celebrated and the corruption of political machines and the idea that women do not belong in politics are criticized. Although the Golden Age of Order limited the creative freedom of filmmakers in many ways, the need to write narratives with positive themes led to great films such as Capra's that carry positive messages that have endured the test of time for nearly a century. The same values that are affirmed and criticized by the characters and events in *Mr. Smith Goes to*

Washington are viewed as important in today's American society, and it seems likely that they will continue to be in the future.