

# Reel Presidents: Hollywood Depictions of US Presidents

Written by Iwan Morgan

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IWAN MORGAN, OCT 24 2013

There are many American films that feature real US presidents as cinematic characters but only a few presidents have truly fascinated movie-makers. Hollywood's representation of presidents has tended until recent times to idealize them as great leaders of the exceptional nation rather than political leaders struggling to operate within the confines of their office. Accordingly, movies effectively wrote out of American history and politics those presidents that did not fit the mould of historic shapers of the nation's destiny – until the developments of the Vietnam-Watergate era forced a rendezvous with reality.[1]

The presidents that have predominantly interested Hollywood are: Thomas Jefferson (1801-09); Andrew Jackson (1829-37); Abraham Lincoln (1861-65); Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09); Woodrow Wilson (1913-21); Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45); John F. Kennedy (1961-63); and Richard Nixon (1969-1977). A surprise omission from this list is George Washington (1789-1797), who interested movie-makers mainly as a Revolutionary War general – doubtless because it was easier to depict his heroic status as a soldier rather than a president who tried to operate above the political fray of the 1790s. Another soldier-president, Ulysses S. Grant (1869-77), was primarily depicted as a Civil War general, not least because his administration was tainted by scandal and corruption. Only after the real Richard Nixon (1969-77) demonstrated that presidents were not necessarily paragons of political virtue was Hollywood willing to show an un-heroic side to them.

Without doubt, the most regularly featured movie president is Abraham Lincoln.[2] Early Hollywood primarily represented him as the saviour of the Union and seeker of reconciliation with the South once the Civil War was over. This is the Lincoln that appears in D.W. Griffith's racist silent movie, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and the same director's *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), the first talkie biopic of any president. In the Depression decade, however, moviemakers used him as a reminder of America's capacity to triumph over internal crisis and sustain its best values. This is the message of John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939), which allegorizes this theme through depiction of a fictional episode in his pre-presidential life, and John Cromwell's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), which takes Lincoln's life up to 1860 in showing him to represent the same concern for the common man as FDR's New Deal. It may well be significant, therefore, that there were no further Hollywood biopics of Lincoln until the economic crisis of the early twenty-first century.

Largely missing from classic Hollywood's glorification of Lincoln was his role as the Great Emancipator. Race remained a subject that movies conventionally shunned until the Civil Right Revolution of the 1960s impacted on popular culture. Accordingly, it is central to recent movies about the sixteenth president. Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) focuses on his part in getting Congress in early 1865 to approve the XIIIth Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery. To purify America, however, Lincoln engages in bribery, manipulation, and coercion to get his way – a comment perhaps that Barack Obama has been too consensual in seeking accommodation with today's conservative Republicans. Rather overshadowed by the award-winning Spielberg film is Timur Bakmambetov's *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012). Capitalizing on the current vogue for the undead in television and literature, it allegorizes vampires with Southern slave-owners and clearly suggests in its ending that Lincoln's success in abolishing slavery did not mean the end of racism that a new breed of vampires would perpetuate.

Classic Hollywood largely portrayed Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson as leaders who opened up the

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American West. In *The Far Horizons* (1955), Jefferson is the president who despatches Meriwether Lewis and William Clarke to map the western lands acquired in the Louisiana Purchase from France. Jackson is portrayed in *The Buccaneer* (1958) as the brave general who won the 1815 battle of New Orleans to save these newly acquired territories from British conquest. In *Man of Conquest* (1939) and *Lone Star* (1952) he features (as president in the former, ex-president in the latter) helping Texas gain independence from Mexico and then become a state in the American Union. A more human story of his pre-presidential life but one with a strong taming-of-the-frontier context, *The President's Lady* (1953) tells of his devotion to his wife during his rise to the presidency despite persistent allegations that she was a bigamist. Significantly, none of these films portray Jefferson and Jackson as slave-owners. It took an Anglo-Indian production, *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), to show the author of the Declaration of Independence, with its affirmation that 'all men are created equal,' as a slave-owner and practitioner of miscegenation.[3]

For some twentieth-century presidents, the cinematic equivalent of the winning of the West is their role in making America secure in a dangerous world and promoting its values on the international stage. Teddy Roosevelt has featured in this role in many movies. Arguably his finest representation has been in John Milius's *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), made at a time of post-Vietnam disillusion. It shows him rather yearningly as patriotic, tough, and wise in dealing with an American hostage crisis in the Muslim world before the age of the institutionalized presidency, the military-industrial complex, and superpower geopolitics. [4]

The real Theodore Roosevelt was, of course, an early exemplar of the realist tradition in American foreign policy as the US rose to global power. Woodrow Wilson, by contrast, was associated with liberal internationalist ideas that a peaceful and orderly world could be achieved through cooperation among nations. His internationalism was idealized in *Wilson* (1944), a hugely expensive Darryl F. Zanuck project clearly intended to remind Americans that US membership of the League of Nations could have prevented renewed global conflict and to encourage them to support US membership of the post-World War II United Nations Organization.

Second only to Lincoln in the presidential movie stakes is Franklin D. Roosevelt. Exploiting his early popularity, a host of Hollywood movies appropriated his image to sell cinema tickets. Arguably the greatest of these was *Footlight Parade* (1933) in its Busby Berkeley-directed Shanghai Lil finale. This ends with dancers holding up giant cards that form a portrait of FDR and then turning them over to form the Blue Eagle symbol of the New Deal's National Recovery Administration. More enduringly, movies have utilized the wheelchair-bound Roosevelt's personal battle to ensure that he was not defined by his disability, the result of contracting polio in middle age, as symbolic of his bold leadership in depression and war. In *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960) he is shown coming to term with his illness and triumphing over it to renew his pre-presidential political career in the 1920s. In *Pearl Harbor* (2000), he is told in a White House meeting with military advisers that an air strike against the Japanese mainland in retaliation for the surprise attack on the US fleet is impossible, but responds by dragging himself to his feet with huge physical effort to prove that anything can be done. In a more recent movie outing, *Hyde Park on the Hudson* (2012), FDR is humanized as a philanderer and a man weary of office but who still responds to the call of duty to consolidate Anglo-American friendship in the face of the coming war with Hitler.

Despite the modest revision of FDR, Hollywood shows no signs of departing from hagiography in its treatment of John F. Kennedy. In a naked piece of propaganda for his expected re-election campaign, a Warner Brothers movie, *PT 109* (1963), portrayed the young JFK's heroism as a junior naval officer in World War II. Nearly forty years later, left-wing film-maker Oliver Stone's movie, *JFK* (1991), portrayed Kennedy's assassination as the conspiracy of military and intelligence agencies fearful that he would pull out of Vietnam and focus on domestic reform. The film offered little explanation of Kennedy's record in office as a Cold War hawk and reluctant civil rights reformer. Continuing the trend of celebrating a heroic president, Roger Donaldson's *Thirteen Days* (2000) lauded Kennedy's management of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but gave no explanation of his role in provoking it or the significance of others in his administration in helping to avert nuclear war.[5]

If JFK is still Hollywood's poster boy, Richard Nixon serves as its embodiment of all that is wrong with America.[6] A host of movies have dealt with his role in the Watergate cover-up, notably: *All the President's Men* (1976) that mythologizes the work of the journalists who initially exposed White House involvement in the conspiracy; Robert

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Altman's darkly paranoid *Secret Honor* (1984); the satirically comic *Dick* (1999); and *Frost/Nixon* (2008) that dramatizes and mythologizes David Frost's 1977 interviews of Nixon as a trial-by television in place of the real trial he avoided because of his pardon for Watergate wrongdoings. Without doubt, however, the greatest Nixon film is Oliver Stone's masterpiece, *Nixon* (1994). Despite some evident cinematic flaws, this movie shows the thirty-seventh president in human terms as someone anxious to do good but who is in thrall to something he calls 'The Beast,' his name for the forces behind US imperialism – the military-industrial complex, the intelligence agencies, and big business.[7]

Oliver Stone's *W* (2008) is interesting for being the first biopic of an incumbent president, but little else. It compares poorly with his earlier political movies to turn George W. Bush into a cardboard cut-out figure striving for greatness out of a desire to glorify his family's name but ending up tarnishing it. Turning the presidency into the equivalent of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* is not helpful to understanding the broader forces it represents, something Stone tried to tackle to his credit in *Nixon*.

In the wake of Nixon's disgrace, Hollywood finally recognized that presidents were not always heroic. However, it has attributed this more to personal than institutional shortcomings. With the notable exceptions of Spielberg's *Lincoln* and Stone's *Nixon*, presidential films have rarely demonstrated the complexity of the office. This is hardly surprising in cinematically-released movies that have to tell a story in three-reel format, usually lasting up to two hours maximum (in rare cases, three hours), that will interest moviegoers. In fact very few presidential movies do make profits because they are too serious – *JFK*, *Thirteen Days*, and *Lincoln* are rare examples of huge commercial successes, while *Abraham Lincoln*, *Wilson*, and *Nixon* were massive flops. In an age of all-action blockbusters, presidential movies are not alluring financial prospects in the early twenty-first century, but Hollywood remains too fascinated in this subject matter to give up on it. Having hoped to star in a Martin Scorsese movie about the young Theodore Roosevelt, a film that never got made, Leonardo DiCaprio has turned his attention to making a movie about Woodrow Wilson, based on the new Scott Berg biography.[8] Audiences stayed away from the 1944 biopic in droves, but DiCaprio's star quality could yet succeed in resurrecting the Hollywood career of the twenty-eighth president.

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[1] See: Peter C. Rollins and John E. Connor, eds., *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Sarah Miles Bolam and Thomas J. Bolam, *The Presidents on Film* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2007); and Iwan Morgan, ed., *Presidents in the Movies: American History and Politics on Screen* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

[2] Melvyn Stokes, "Abraham Lincoln and the Movies," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 12 (Summer 2011)

[3] Jim Welsh, "Jefferson in Love: The Framer Framed," in Rollins and O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House*, 50-61

[4] Brian Neve, "The 'Picture Man': The Cinematic Strife of Theodore Roosevelt," in Morgan, *Presidents in the Movies*, 65-86

[5] Mark White, *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[6] Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon: A Cultural History of an American Obsession* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

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[7] Kingsley Marshall, "The Cinematic Watergate: From *All the Presidents Men* to *Frost/Nixon*," in Michael Genovese and Iwan Morgan, eds., *Watergate Remembered: The Legacy for American Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 169-82.

[8] Brad Brevett, 'Leonardo DiCaprio Eyes Starring Role in Woodrow Wilson Biopic.' *Rope of Silicon*, September 17, 2013, [www.ropeofsilicon.com](http://www.ropeofsilicon.com); A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

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Iwan Morgan is professor of US Studies at University College London. He has written extensively on US politics and history, especially pertaining to the presidency and to economic policy. His book *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (University Press of Kansas, 2009) won the American Politics Group's Richard Neustadt prize. He is the co-editor (with Robert Mason) of a forthcoming book, *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2013).