

Mr Smith Goes to Washington

US : 1939 : dir. Frank Capra : Columbia : 130 min
 prod: Frank Capra : scr: Sidney Buchman : dir.ph.: Joseph Walker
Dickie Jones; Tommy Baker; Tommy Bupp; Phillip Hurlic; Teddy Infuhr; Bobby Larson; Johnny Russell; Larry Simms; Billy Watson; Delmar Watson; Garry Watson; Harry Watson
 James Stewart; Jean Arthur; Claude Rains; Edward Arnold; Guy Kibbee; Thomas Mitchell; Harry Carey; Beulah Bondi; Eugene Pallette; H B Warner; Charles Lane; Porter Hall; Jack Carson; Grant Mitchell; William Demarest; Ruth Donnelly; Astrid Allwyn

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∞ M ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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“ Stirring – in the seeing !
 Precious – in the remembering ! ”



Dickie Jones shows lobby fodder Stewart how far the previous Senator could spit

Source: Moving Picture Boy

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

“Stewart is a young idealist who finds nothing but corruption in the US Senate. Fine Capra Americana, with Stewart's top performance bolstered by Arthur as a hard-boiled dame won over by earnest Mr Smith, and a stellar supporting cast; Carey is magnificent as the

Vice President. Brilliant script by Sidney Buchman; however, Lewis R Foster's original story received the Oscar. Later a brief TV series. Remade as **"BILLY JACK GOES TO WASHINGTON"**. **** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above



Senator Paine confronts Smith with a trillion telegrams from his home state demanding his impeachment. The voice of the people does not always say what you want to hear.
Source: indeterminate

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Washington's youngest Senator exposes corruption in high places, almost at the cost of his own career. Archetypal high-flying Capra vehicle, with the little man coming out top as he seldom does in life. Supreme gloss hides the corn, helter-skelter direction keeps one watching, and all concerned give memorable performances. A cinema classic. Academy Award: Lewis R Foster; nominations: Best Picture, Frank Capra, James Stewart, Sidney Buchman, Dimitri Tiomkin, Claude Rains, Harry Carey. **** "

SMITH (James Stewart):

"I wouldn't give you two cents for all your fancy rules if, behind them, they didn't have a little bit of plain, ordinary kindness – and a little looking out for the other fella too."

"Timely and absorbing drama presented in best Capra craftsmanship." – **Variety**

"More fun, even, than the senate itself... not merely a brilliant jest, but a stirring and even inspiring testament to liberty and freedom."

– Frank S Nugent, **New York Times**

"It says all the things about America that have been crying out to be said again – and says them beautifully." – **Los Angeles Times**

"The great American picture." – **Billboard**

"I feel that to show this film in foreign countries will do inestimable harm to American prestige all over the world."

– **Joseph P Kennedy**, then US Ambassador to Great Britain

"A totally compelling piece of moviemaking, upholding the virtues of traditional American ideals."

– **NFT**, 1973

"Very good, beautifully done, and extremely entertaining; long, but worth the time it takes."

– Richard Mallett, **Punch**

"More of the heartfelt than is good for the stomach."

– **New Yorker**, 1977

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"A young senator (James Stewart) exposes political corruption in high places. Frank Capra's tale of honesty, integrity and small-town values triumphing over corruption is a great emotional experience – and very nearly perfect. The only major fault is that the pace sags around the middle, when there's too much talk. James Stewart exudes simple idealism like no other actor; as a result, this is a

genuinely inspiring movie. The whole film is beautifully acted, and Capra shows his directorial talent most obviously in the way he uses faces to tell his story. It was voted the second best picture of 1939 ("**GOODBYE, MR CHIPS**" was first) in Film Daily's annual poll of US film critics, and was Oscar-nominated for art direction, editing, score and sound. **9/10** "

ANTI:

"Now and again you hear it said that foreign countries interpret life in America from what they see in American-made pictures. They're going to get a fine idea of the United States Senate when they take a squint at "**MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON**". They're going to get the idea that we reach into jails for our Senators and into the insane asylum for our reformers."

– John M Cummings, **Philadelphia Inquirer**

"Clumsy and irritating" – Otis Ferguson

"Capra played safe, played demagogue, and fought straw bosses." – Jay Leyda, **Direction**

"Succeeded commercially, but the picture has more of the heartfelt in it than is good for the stomach, and it goes on for over two hours... No one else can balance the ups and downs of wistful sentiment and corny humour the way Capra can – but if anyone else should learn to, kill him." – **Pauline Kael**

PRO:

"Frank Capra has another smash hit... Stewart turns in the finest performance of his career."

– **Hollywood Reporter**

"[Capra] has paced it beautifully and held it in perfect balance... James Stewart is a joy for this season, if not forever. He has too many good scenes, but we like to remember the way his voice cracked when he got up to read his bill." – **New York Times**

"For the first time the screen has become eloquent in relation to the significance of our times." – M B Spokane, **Washington Spokesman Review**

"**"MR SMITH"** presents one of those dazzling simple revelations of human values in which Mr Capra excels." – C A Lejeune, **Observer**

"Frank Capra attacks democracy, I saw one critic wrote... The truth is that democracy can stand any attack upon its weaknesses."

– H Swaffer, **Daily Herald**

"When Jimmy Stewart walked the halls of the Capitol building, I walked with him. When he stood in awe of that great man at the Lincoln Memorial, I bowed my head too. When he stood in the Senate chamber and refused to knuckle under to the vested interests, I began to realise, through the power of motion pictures, one man can make a difference."

– **Ronald Reagan**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Sidney Buchman has replaced Riskin as Capra's writer but this film expresses Capra himself even better than "**MR DEEDS GOES TO TOWN**", of which it is a kind of political version. The idealistic and naïve Smith (James Stewart) is sent to the Senate as the tool of three self-serving pillars of society (Claude Rains, Guy Kibbee, Edward Arnold), who offer him a secretary (Jean Arthur) in their camp; he does not know, of course, that he is being manipulated and is considerably more adroit than Mr Deeds when he discovers the deception. Thomas Mitchell, Beulah Bondi, Eugene Pallette, Harry Carey, H B Warner, Grant Mitchell, Jack Carson, Porter Hall, William Demarest, Ruth Donnelly and Astrid Allwyn are also in the cast, which is outstanding even by the standards of the time; they have some funny lines to relieve an occasion often threatened by earnestness. Washington itself hated the film, to Capra's naïve astonishment, but the public loved it. *** "

The Movie Book – a comprehensive, authoritative, omnibus volume on motion pictures and the cinema world – comment:

"...Capra was involved with the proletariat for most of his career, and he would only use an actor like Cary Grant for so frivolous a farce as "**ARSENIC AND OLD LACE**". For the populist manifestos that were closest to his heart Capra preferred to employ Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart, Aw, shucks boys from down home who could stand in for the little people in a way that city slicker Grant never could. In "**MR DEEDS GOES TO TOWN**" and "**MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON**" Capra grew so concerned with social commitment that the term comedy

hardly applies, while "**MEET JOHN DOE**" has fewer laughs than "**LOST HORIZON**".."

The Movies – the sixty-year story of the world of Hollywood from pre-nickelodeon days to the present – caption:

"James Stewart learns from telegrams that the public, far from supporting him in his dispute with the corrupt "Silver Knight", Senator Claude Rains, sides with Rains. Later, of course, it rallies to Stewart¹. Frank Capra's immensely popular message pictures argued that all would come right with the nation if we replaced politicians with idealists. His message was – turn the rascals out, but he was somewhat vague about how to do it."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"A naïve young man is elected to the US Senate, but he doesn't conform to the pattern set for him by his manipulative backers, who expected a malleable figurehead, not an honest politician determined to shake things up. Frank Capra's populist idealism was never as palatable as it is here, particularly in the scene where Jimmy carries on a one-man filibuster to thwart the conscienceless power-brokers trying to control the Senate. A timeless comedy-drama. **** "

A Pictorial History of the Talkies general note:

"1939: On December 15, one of the great films of all time, "**GONE WITH THE WIND**", had its world premiere in Atlanta, Georgia... Hollywood producers kept to their large production schedules despite the war abroad and the curtailing of foreign revenues... Among the outstanding films were "**WUTHERING HEIGHTS**", "**STAGE COACH**", "**GOODBYE, MR CHIPS**", "**MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON**", "**NINOTCHKA**", "**THE WIZARD OF OZ**", "**JUAREZ**", "**LOVE AFFAIR**", "**THE WOMEN**", and a French film, "**HARVEST**"..."

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

¹ Not so. The film ends only moments after this scene, and the baskets of damning telegrams remain unopened on the Senate table.

"This superb discourse on corruption in American politics is one of Hollywood's finest achievements. Director Frank Capra resolutely and remarkably (for him) keeps sentimentality at bay in his film of Lewis R Foster's Oscar-winning original story (adapted by Sidney Buchman) about an idealistic young Senator who finally realises that he is not his own man. Washington hated this movie, but the public flocked to see James Stewart in, arguably, his finest hour. Few movies are as well cast. The bell-voiced Jean Arthur is wonderful as a super-cynical secretary, but veteran Western star Harry Carey is quite magnificent as the vice president, one of the greatest supporting roles in all cinema, and alone a reason for viewing. From the book "*The Gentleman From Montana*" by Lewis R Foster. ***** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"This is among the best of director Frank Capra's comedy/dramas. Stewart gives a stirring performance as a forthright freshman senator who encounters corruption in the nation's capital. It's an inspiring portrait of how elected officials ought to behave. Stewart's naïve, inarticulate, and clumsy character is an interesting contrast to Rains, who portrays a sophisticated and manipulative orator – a contrast that enhances Capra's theme of the triumph of the ordinary person over the corrupt elite. Also with Harry Carey, Thomas Mitchell, Edward Arnold, Guy Kibbee, and Beulah Bondi. Academy Award: Lewis R Foster, Best Original Story. Nominations: Best Picture; Capra, Best Director; Stewart, Best Actor; Carey and Rains, Best Supporting Actor; Sidney Buchman, Best Screenplay. **** "

That Was Hollywood – the 1930s review:

"Frank Capra's latest picture was a smash hit that held up remarkably well on extended runs thanks to the enthusiastic word of mouth. James Stewart made the breakthrough to front-rank stardom, superbly playing the shy, idealistic young senator who stubbornly refuses to be the stooge of a crooked party machine and eventually, after a gruelling filibuster on the Senate floor, wins the day. It had echoes of "**MR DEEDS GOES TO TOWN**" – especially in the repeat casting of Jean Arthur as the cynical figure who first wounds the hero but ultimately inspires him to victory – but it was none the worse for that.

In the dark days of war in Europe it had an intensely relevant message about the need to be watchful and not take freedom for granted and to defend it against all odds. Claude Rains co-starred as a dignified senator who is really corrupt, Edward Arnold was the political boss, Guy Kibbee appeared as a bought governor, Beulah Bondi played Stewart's mum, Thomas Mitchell was a political reporter and cowboy star Harry Carey Sr was the avuncular vice-president whose encouragement makes senator Smith's victory possible. The original story was by Lewis R Foster, the screenplay by Sidney Buchman."

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Stewart's young Wisconsin Senator exposing corruption and upholding true American values [*sic*] in a Senate House riddled with graft is quintessential Capra – popular wish-fulfilment served up with such fast-talking comic panache that you don't have time to question its cornball idealism. Scriptwriter Sidney Buchman's crackling dialogue is also lent sharp-tongued conviction by Rains, as the slimy senior senator, Jean Arthur as the hard-boiled dame finally won over by Stewart's honesty, and Harry Carey as the Vice President."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Nominated for eight Oscars, Frank Capra's magnificently corny epic of the "little man" taking on corrupt politicians remains one of the cinema's enduring classics, with splendid performances all round. Young James Stewart, perfectly cast as the heart-breakingly sincere country boy, is delightfully teamed with lovely Jean Arthur [*sic*], a city slicker secretary with a well-concealed heart of gold. Edward Arthur and Claude Rains make a formidable pair of villains, but Harry Carey's late appearance (as the Senate president) almost steals the whole show. Be prepared, though, for an over-hasty climax. **** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Frank Capra goes to Washington in unwinding the story (by Lewis R Foster), and in so doing provides a graphic picture of just how the national lawmakers operate. Capra never attempts to expose political skullduggery on a wide scale. He exposes one state political

machine and after displaying its power and truthlessness, proceeds to tear it to pieces.

Stewart is a most happy choice for the title role, delivering sincerity to a difficult part that introduces him as a self-conscious idealist, but a stalwart fighter when faced with a battle to overcome the ruthless political machine of his own state. Jean Arthur is excellent as the wisely cynical senatorial secretary who knows the political ropes of Washington. Replica of the Senate chamber provides a fine set for the filibustering episode. Oscar 1939: Best Original Story; nomination: Best Picture."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This Frank Capra classic is the story of a naïve senator's fight against political corruption. James Stewart stars as Jefferson Smith, the idealistic scoutmaster who is appointed to fill out the term of a dead Senator. Upon arriving at the capitol, he begins to get a hint of the corruption in his home state. His passionate filibuster against this corruption remains one of the most emotionally powerful scenes in film history. ***** "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Stellar Capra-corn Americana. This great film works on the premise that all that is necessary for evil to triumph is the inaction of good men. Against this danger, director Frank Capra shows a movie everyman to be the true guardian of democratic ideals. James Stewart gives the performance that made him a star as Jefferson Smith, an innocent bumpkin selected by cynical politicians to replace a recently deceased senator in the belief that he can be manipulated by the state's esteemed senior senator, Joseph Paine (Claude Rains).

Smith sets off for Washington full of ideals and dreams of working with his idol, Paine, little realising that he is expected to be a rubber stamp for a crooked scheme to finance a new dam that will profit only Paine and his cronies.² The Washington press immediately sizes Smith up as a gullible novice, getting him off to a rocky start, but his idealism captivates Saunders (Jean Arthur), his cynical new secretary. Saunders proves to be a valuable mentor as the innocent Smith slowly comes to

² *Inaccurate. Paine himself is merely the hired puppet of a Wisconsin press tycoon, who has bought up all the land surrounding the proposed dam site.*

realise that his altruistic view of the world doesn't necessarily jibe with reality, and he sets out to expose those who make a mockery of the country he loves so dearly.

While **"MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON"** is the most moral of his films, it is so artfully filled with real emotion that it never seems heavy-handed. Capra supervised every element of the production and used a variety of techniques to accelerate the story line without disrupting it, making every move by every player meaningful and illustrating his credo of "one man, one film". This inspiring masterpiece received 11 Oscar nominations but won only for Best Original Story. Stewart is tops and the rest of the much-loved cast, featuring such familiar veterans as Thomas Mitchell, Edward Arnold, William Demarest and especially Harry Carey, provides unforgettable support. ***** "

Cast:

Jefferson SmithJames Stewart
 Sen. Joseph PaineClaude Rains
 SaundersJean Arthur
 Jim TaylorEdward Arnold
 Gov. Hubert HopperGuy Kibbee
 Diz MooreThomas Mitchell
 Chick McGannEugene Pallette
 Ma SmithBeulah Bondi
 Sen. FullerH. B. Warner
 President of the SenateHarry Carey
 Susan PaineAstrid Allwyn
 Mrs HopperRuth Donnelly
 Senator MacPhersonGrant Mitchell
 Senator MonroePorter Hall
 Senate Minority LeaderPierre Watkin
 NoseyCharles Lane
 Bill GriffithWilliam Demarest
 Carl CookDick Elliott
 Dick JonesDickie Jones
 Gov. Hopper's children
 Billy Watson
 Delmar Watson
 John Russell
 Garry Watson
 Harry Watson
 Baby Dumpling (Larry Simms)

[supplementary credits courtesy of
 Winchester's Screen Encyclopedia]

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Dickie Jones:

"...Dick Jones was in a famous 1942 film, **"THIS GUN FOR HIRE"**, but unfortunately his part was left on the cutting room floor. It had been a nice compliment to him, though, that in **"MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON"** he had played James Stewart's faithful Senate page-boy "Dick Jones", a role repeated in a sort of junior spin-off the following year: **"ADVENTURE IN WASHINGTON"**. (This had been originally called **"SENATE PAGE BOYS"**.) From 1942 Dick was heard coast-to-coast in the title role of the *"Henry Aldrich"* radio series..."

[no listing in "50 Years of the Movies", or "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television"]

Radio Times listing:

"Frank Capra's classic political comedy drama, starring James Stewart and Jean Arthur, with Claude Rains. Naïve young senator Jefferson Smith heads for Washington, unaware that he's been hand-picked to protect the political and commercial interests of the governor and a local media magnate. ***** "

"Not a lot of people know that... in **"MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON"**, James Stewart had a doctor on set to administer a mercury compound so that his voice would sound suitably hoarse with the effort of filibustering Claude Rains's crooked bill in the Senate."

The public loved it. The critics loved it. I find myself out of step, as usual. In this film Capra flatters the tender illusions of the American public, polishes their quasi-mystical sense of their own righteousness, and elevates painful naiveté to a state of grace. Stewart is his “honest fool”, the simpleton who shames the wily by his unabashed romanticism. Delicately handled, such sentiment can be charming and endearing, but Capra plays it for comedy and full-blown melodrama, both at once, and his ending is simply excruciating. After a twenty-four filibustering session, Stewart literally swoons to the Senate floor, at which point the dastardly Claude Rains, having bested his opponent, runs amok with a pistol, shrieking “I’m not fit to be a Senator! I’m not fit to *live!*” Everybody cheers and whistles from the visitors’ gallery, and the end credits roll.

It’s a feel-good whimsy of course, poking with a rather blunted stick at the endemic corruption of the US political process, but the genuine irony is that all of Stewart’s rhetoric about the simple virtues of the constitution and founding fathers is precisely what spills from the honeyed lips of career politicians great and small. He might have been bucking for a career as presidential speechwriter. That the Washington mafia actually took offense at this film, soft

as its punches are, is the greatest of compliments to it. Nominated for eight major Oscars, it picked up only one – for the original story – 1939 was the year of **“GONE WITH THE WIND”**. But Capra had picked up the Best Director Oscar in 1938 for **“YOU CAN’T TAKE IT WITH YOU”**, and Stewart collected the Best Actor in 1940, for **“THE PHILADELPHIA STORY”**.

Irony is precisely what the story lacks, most notably in the patriotic montage (by Slavko Vorpavich) as the dewy-eyed junior Senator first arrives at Valhalla and tours the shrines of the gods. It is the most literal outburst of flag-waving imaginable – Old Glory fluttering in the background to shots of the Lincoln Memorial and various sacred soundbites graven in stone. Capra *is* Stewart, giddy with adulation for the mirages of democracy – that democracy which was all set to convene its House Committee on Un-American Activities, and half of which was still living in a state of formalised apartheid. It’s very telling that people like Joseph Kennedy complained the film was “bad PR” for Washington, not that its allegations were substantially false. They were accusing Capra of washing America’s dirty linen in public, not denying that the linen was dirty in the first place.

Why does it belong here at all? There’s certainly no hint in any of the above reviews why the film would be of interest to this archive, but a glance at the cast will show that it contains practically every boy actor within fifty square miles of the studio. Allow me to explain.

Jefferson Smith runs the Boy Rangers movement in Wisconsin, and has set up his own paper for them called *“Boys’ Stuff”*. He’s bewildered and uncomfortable to find himself elected junior senator for his home state, but when he arrives in D.C. hits on the notion of presenting a bill to found a national boys’ camp there for inner city kids, the cost to be repaid out of nickel and dime contributions from the boys themselves. He’s not aware that the Washington sophisticates view his rustic scoutmaster as a joke, or that the encouragement he receives from Senator Paine (Rains) is meant to deflect him from unwelcome scrutiny of certain other bills requiring his vote. Smith is a great hero to the local boys, and at the opening of the film we see corrupt Governor Harper (Guy Kibbee) being harangued at his dinner table by his eight (!) school-age kids to nominate Smith for the vacant Senate seat. These are the Watson brothers (or some of them, at any rate), plus “Baby Dumpling” – that’s how he’s named on the film credits – from the popular **“BLONDIE”** series.

Smith discovers that the proposed site for his boys’ camp, “Willett’s Crick”, has already been earmarked for a dam project to line the pockets of industrialist Jim Taylor, who all but owns his state. When he attempts to expose this corruption, Taylor uses Senator Paine to demolish Smith’s reputation and call for his impeachment. As the vote is about to be taken to strip him of public office, Smith makes use of the “filibuster” tactic – once a Senator is on his feet and

addressing the house, he may continue to speak until he drops, or yields the floor to another speaker. Taylor uses his control of the local press to prevent Smith's revelations reaching the voters at home, but Smith's boy rangers rally to his aid, using his "*Boys' Stuff*" paper to spread the word. This is all conveyed in a hasty montage of cut-away scenes, and again Capra overplays his hand, showing Taylor's henchmen smashing up the boys' press, or literally running their delivery carts off the road and putting them in hospital.

The second level of interest is the role in the proceedings of the Senate page-boys, most of them seemingly no older than 12 or 13 in 1939. The USA was so keen to model its legislature on that of Republican Rome they even included the detail of slave boys in the Senate. Dickie Jones, playing page Dick Jones, is the only one given a significant role, and escorts Smith to the desk formerly occupied by the great Daniel Webster ("**ALL THAT MONEY CAN BUY**"). The Senate page boys themselves became the subject of a major scandal in the late 1980s (taking their Roman antecedents too literally), but Capra would have died a thousand deaths before exposing shenanigans of *that* kind within earshot of the

Lincoln Memorial.

Capra's true enemy, it might be fair to say, is not corruption in high places, but cynicism itself. Smith is derided as an overgrown boy scout, and that is precisely how he has Stewart play him – suitably in awe of the "great and the good", suitably tongue-tied when he stands to deliver his maiden speech, suitably bashful in the presence of women. Indeed, when Saunders warms to him and coaches him with preparing his bill, she confides in journalist Diz Moore later that she felt like a mother sending her child off to his first day at school, hoping he'll be able to stand up to the other boys. It's a strange basis for a romance. When Senator Paige ("the silver knight") implores him to back off and not confront the vested interests, he says "You've been living in a boys' world, Jeff, and for heaven's sake stay there!" Capra's thesis then, is that if only we could all look at life through the eager bright eyes of a boy scout, perhaps there wouldn't be so much wickedness in the world. Ignorance is bliss.

"**MR SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON**" is, in one sense, the polar opposite of "**ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**". It proceeds from the assumption that we basically trust our politicians, and *want* to trust them. It uses James Stewart as a magic bullet to cure the corruption of power, rather than suggesting we must remain vigilant, and watch our elected representatives like hawks. Finally, how much one enjoys the film depends on which remedy seems the more sensible, which view of political life the more accurate.

The four Watson brothers (Bobs Watson, their better known sibling, was busy elsewhere) can be seen together in "**LIFE BEGINS AT 40**" (35). Larry Simms, a strikingly pretty child though not over-burdened with brains, was just 4, and grew to adolescence in the **BLONDIE** series. Dickie Jones was 12, appeared in basketfuls of films in the 1930s, is remembered for none of them, and turned up again in 1941 for "**ADVENTURE IN WASHINGTON**", which was more focused on the Senate page boys than the Senators.

See subject index under [KID STRIKERS / KID PROTESTORS / KID DEMONSTRATORS](#), [SCOUTS & SCOUTING / YOUTH MOVEMENTS](#), [SUMMER CAMP / SUMMER SCHOOL](#) and [WORKING BOYS & GIRLS](#).