

Click to verify























Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is a classic movie about American government and politics. At the opening of the movie, a U.S. Senator dies. His replacement is a naive exemplar of a citizen from the midwest, Jeff Smith. When Mr. Smith gets to Washington, he realizes that things aren't quite as rosy and perfect as he thought, and he comes face to face with corruption in the United States government. This movie is old, but it is still extremely relevant. Despite being in black and white, I've found that my students still enjoy it. It is an excellent way to illustrate both the mechanics of government and the ways in which the reality of government diverges from the ideal. Mr. Smith Goes to Washington Plot Summary If you've never seen the movie, here's a quick plot summary. If you have, you may want to just jump down to the next section about the ways in which this is a great tool for teaching civics. As the movie opens, Senator Sam Foley dies. The Governor of his state, Hubert "Happy" Hopper, must appoint a successor. In the opening scenes, Hopper gets an earful from his constituents and lobbyists, and he has to deal with the press. Behind the scenes, he is advised by a seemingly corrupt political boss, Jim Taylor. Ultimately, they land on Jefferson Smith – a Boy Scout leader and a naive, model citizen – as a replacement. Jim Taylor is plotting to make a lot of money through a real estate scheme, and he needs a Senator that won't ask too many questions about what's going on. Jeff Smith can quote all of the founding fathers, and for better or worse he believes in the mythology of America. When he first arrives in Washington, he takes off on a tour of the city to take in all of the patriotic sights and sounds. Eventually, he comes back to his office and begins to ask questions about the business of the Senate. In order to distract Smith, Paine suggests that he work on a bill of his own. His secretary gives him a depressing explanation of the legislative process, but Jeff goes through with drafting a bill to create a national boys camp. As it turns out, Jeff's boys camp is to be built on the same piece of land that Jim Taylor has been planning to sell to the government. Jeff Smith starts digging around and threatens to uncover the whole plot, so Taylor decides to point the finger at Smith and frame him for the whole corrupt idea. There is a great deal of political drama as the Senate considers whether or not to expel Jeff Smith, and he holds the floor in a lengthy filibuster. Does Jeff Smith or Jim Taylor win out? You'll have to watch the movie to find out. This classic film is useful for both teaching the mechanics of government and for discussing some of the essential questions about civics. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are five ideas worth focusing on while you view the movie with your students. How Does the Filibuster Affect the Legislative Process? One of the most dramatic parts of the movie is when Jeff Smith takes the floor of the Senate and holds it in a filibuster. This is a great illustration of what a traditional filibuster actually is and how physically demanding it can be. It sounds easy enough to just keep talking, but the reality is that after a few hours it becomes not only tedious but strenuous. This can also be a good opportunity to talk about the ways in which the filibuster has changed in recent years or to take a look at recent examples of filibusters. In the movie Jeff Smith brought an apple for a snack, and you can watch a video of Rand Paul eating a candy bar on the Senate floor halfway through his thirteen hour filibuster. Are Political Bosses a Corrupting Influence on Politics? Jim Taylor provides a foil to Jeff Smith. Jim is as dishonest and evil as Jeff is good and honest. On the one hand, Jim Taylor provides a concrete example of corruption in politics. He's using his influence to directly profit himself. But underneath the surface is a more subtle question of the extent to which is influence itself is corrupting and bad. This is an opportunity to talk about campaign finance and the relationships between politicians and donors. If Taylor hadn't been scheming for his own profit, would it have been as wrong for him to advise the Governor on the appointment of a new Senator? One doesn't have to look far in New Jersey for a businessman who has a very tight relationship with powerful politicians and control of elements of the media. How Does Public Opinion Influence Legislators? The scenes of the young boy rangers printing newspapers and delivering them immediately was probably one of the more over-dramatized and unrealistic parts of the film. But it's an interesting plot element for talking about the role of the media. Today, you could definitely communicate with lightning speed via social media. What's going on in Washington is constantly being televised on C-SPAN and beamed across the Internet. And if the cameras are shut off, there's always Facebook live. How Do Bills Really Become Laws? At one point, Jeff Smith's secretary gives him an earful about the legislative process. He seems to have just seen the classic "How a Bill Becomes a Law" Schoolhouse Rocks video, and he's optimistic that his bill will easily pass because it's a good idea. She deals him a dose of reality and explains the real process. A bill has to jump through all kinds of hurdles and survive any number of delays in order to make it to the end of the process. She gives a pretty accurate, albeit pessimistic, explanation, and this difference between the reality of lawmaking and the ideal nature of the process is good fodder for discussion. You could also watch this Daily Show clip from a few years back. Do Politicians Represent Their Principles, Their People, or Their Parties? There's also a discussion to be had about who Senators and politicians are elected to represent. When a politician makes a decision, they have to balance a number of priorities – their own principles and beliefs, the desires of their constituents, and the demands of their respective political parties. On the one hand, Jeff Smith seems to be insisting that an honest Senator with integrity would stand up for his principles before anything else. But is it all that had to make a decision that prioritizes one of the other two? Watch Mr. Smith Goes to Washington This Year This is a great movie, and you should consider watching it with your class or assigning it as an optional assignment this year. If you're concerned about wasting class time, here are some creative ways to incorporate movies into your class. And if you've never seen it yourself, you should definitely add it to your to do list. Head over to Amazon and pick up a copy. I think it's also available to stream on Hulu. And if you're looking for another movie that might be interesting, check out this list of 24 great government movies. And don't forget to let us know what the kids thought of it... On October 17, 1939, Frank Capra's Mr. Smith Goes to Washington premiered, becoming a landmark in American cinema. Starring James Stewart as the sincere and unassuming Jefferson Smith, this political drama explores the conflict between idealism and corruption in the American political system. The film captured the hearts of audiences and left an indelible mark on the cultural and political landscape. Poster for the theatrical run of the 1939 American film Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. The Plot: A Fresh Perspective The film follows Jefferson Smith, a leader of a boys' camp who is unexpectedly appointed to the U.S. Senate. With little knowledge of the workings of Washington, Smith arrives with boundless optimism and a desire to improve the lives of ordinary citizens. However, his innocence is quickly challenged as he encounters the darker side of politics—corruption, manipulation, and deceit. When Smith stumbles upon a crooked scheme involving the construction of a dam that threatens the wilderness he cherishes, he finds himself at odds with powerful political forces. Determined to fight for what's right, Smith refuses to back down. The film reaches its dramatic peak during a memorable filibuster scene, where he stands alone on the Senate floor, tirelessly speaking out against the corruption he has witnessed. Smith's impassioned defense of democracy, justice, and the rights of ordinary people highlights the power of integrity, even when faced with overwhelming opposition. Themes of Idealism vs. Realism At its heart, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington explores the tension between idealism and the harsh realities of political life. Jefferson Smith embodies the idealistic vision of American democracy—one where every citizen's voice matters, and one person's moral courage can make a difference. In contrast, the seasoned politicians around him represent the entrenched corruption and pragmatism that can erode these ideals. Smith's journey is a reflection of the struggle between maintaining one's principles and succumbing to the pressures of political expediency. The film also challenges viewers to think about their own role in civic life. It emphasizes the importance of public engagement, integrity, and the belief that democracy thrives when individuals are willing to stand up for justice, even when the odds are against them. Paine and Smith in the Senate, with Smith holding letters and telegrams demanding his resignation in the final scene Cultural Impact and Legacy Upon its release, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington sparked both praise and controversy. While many embraced its call for political reform and ethical governance, some politicians criticized it as an overly harsh portrayal of the American political system. Nonetheless, the film resonated with audiences, and its message of standing up to corruption struck a chord during a time of global unrest on the eve of World War II. Mr. Smith Goes to Washington was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actor, winning Best Original Story. Over the years, the film has become a touchstone for discussions about democracy, transparency, and accountability in government. James Stewart's portrayal of Jefferson Smith remains iconic, symbolizing the triumph of innocence and integrity over cynicism and greed. The film's memorable moments, from Smith's emotional filibuster to his stirring closing lines, continue to inspire viewers and serve as a powerful reminder of the enduring values of democracy. Conclusion: A Relevant Message As we reflect on Mr. Smith Goes to Washington more than eight decades after its release, its message remains timeless. Jefferson Smith's journey serves as a reminder that one person's voice, fueled by conviction and integrity, can make a difference. The film challenges us to engage in our democracy, to hold our leaders accountable, and to never lose hope in the power of our ideals. In revisiting this classic, we are reminded of the importance of standing up for what is right, even in the face of adversity. Like Jefferson Smith, we, too, can strive to uphold the integrity that defines not only the film but the spirit of democracy itself. Home Columns From the Show Videos Photos Events Store More Lessons from Mr. Smith Goes to Washington What lessons can be learned from Mr. Smith Goes to Washington? Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is a fictional film about a man, Jefferson Smith, who has never been involved in politics before, but who gets picked to become a senator after the current incumbent passes away. While he goes into the job knowing nothing, he learns a lot and teaches others important life lessons. Jefferson Smith runs a boy scout troop back home. The boys come from all different backgrounds, but Smith brings them all together. Smith shows kindness to the boys that many of them do not often receive. He lets them come into his home, he feeds them, teaches them lessons, and shows them his pure kindness. With being a leader of the boys troop and now being in the Senate, he comes up with a proposal for a bill, ...show more content... He promises them that he will get this bill passed into law, showing his loyalty to the boys. Even though he faced backlash from the Senate, was framed by Jim Taylor, a businessman who corrupts and tells politicians what to do, and was almost expelled from the Senate. When the Senate meets to discuss and vote on his expulsion, he takes the floor and does not stop talking for over 24 hours, causing a filibuster. He is determined to stay in the Senate and pass his bill because he promised the boys that he would make it happen. While Taylor works to make sure that no paper prints anything positive about Smith and his filibuster, Saunders and Diz Moore, a journalist in Washington, print about Smith in his boys newspaper. He perseveres through the long hours of standing, constant talking, and no sleep for the boys, eventually passing out. Something connects for Senator Tom Paine, the man who chose Smith for the Senate and who helped set him up for failure after Smith's fainting. He came clean and said that Smith was being framed and it was him and Taylor who were lying about Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is Frank Capra's 1939 political "dramedy" starring a then-unknown James Stewart as Senator Jefferson Smith, a naive but good-hearted Western man with the political idealism to take down corruption in Washington. The film was adapted from an unreleased story called "The Gentleman from Montana" by Lewis R. Foster. In the film, Smith fights against the corruption of the political machine to make sure that the American ideals he holds so dear are upheld. Along with Jimmy Stewart, the film stars Jean Arthur, Claude Rains, Edward Arnold, and Guy Kibbee. Frank Capra was known throughout the 1930s as a director who wanted to make films celebrating the power of the little guy going up against the system. Films like Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, It's a Wonderful Life, and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington explored this topic in ways that delighted audiences and critics alike. Upon release, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington was met with poor reactions from those in Washington, D.C. (and Nazi-controlled countries like France and Germany, where it was banned), but received very good reviews from the public. Writes Jeff Beck at The Examiner, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington remains one of the quintessential films about American politics to this very day." The film was also nominated for 11 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (for Stewart), Best Screenplay, Best Original Story (which it won), Best Supporting Actor (for Claude Rains and Harry Carey), Best Art Direction, Best Editing, Best Music (Score), and Best Sound Recording. Leaders can learn a lot from Jefferson Smith as portrayed by Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith Goes to ... (+) Washington. Corbis via Getty Images Last week, millions were watching the presidential inauguration. While flipping through the TV channels on that same day, I settled on political story of another sort: Frank Capra's Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. The 1939 classic tells the story of Jefferson Smith, an idealistic outsider thrust into the U.S. Senate who takes on systemic corruption with little more than integrity, courage, and a steadfast belief in doing what is right. While fictional and idealistic, Smith's journey highlights leadership traits that remain as relevant today as they were in the film's era. By exploring Smith's story, we uncover actionable insights for leaders navigating complexity, adversity, and the pursuit of purpose. At the heart of Jefferson Smith's leadership is his unwavering commitment to a cause greater than himself. His fight to protect the land for a boys' camp symbolizes his belief in leaving a lasting legacy. This clarity of purpose galvanizes his actions and inspires others to join his mission. Leaders can draw from this principle by clearly defining their values and ensuring their decisions align with them. Neuroscience supports this idea, as purpose-driven leaders activate parts of the brain associated with motivation and reward, driving engagement and long-term success Smith's defining moment—his marathon filibuster—underscores the importance of courage and resilience in leadership. Despite exhaustion and overwhelming odds, he persists in standing up for what he believes is right. His resolve demonstrates that effective leaders must have the courage to act, even when the path forward is fraught with resistance. This aligns with research on stress and resilience, which shows that leaders who can regulate their stress responses are better equipped to persevere under pressure. Developing resilience not only helps leaders endure challenges but also serves as an example for their teams to stay focused and committed. Use Storytelling to Mobilize Others Jefferson Smith's sincerity and ability to tell stories—whether about the values of his small-town upbringing or the dreams of the boys he represents—are central to his impact. Stories are a powerful leadership tool, engaging both the emotions and the intellect of listeners. Cognitive science reveals that stories activate multiple areas of the brain, fostering empathy and making ideas memorable. Leaders who use storytelling effectively can inspire action, align teams around shared goals, and create lasting change Lead with Integrity, Not Authority While Jefferson Smith's authority as a senator is formalized, his influence stems from his integrity and authenticity. He doesn't rely on positional power but earns respect through his consistent actions and ethical convictions. This lesson is vital for modern leaders navigating environments where hierarchical authority is less effective. Authentic leadership, supported by behavioral research, fosters trust and psychological safety, enabling teams to collaborate more effectively. Challenge the Status Quo Smith's refusal to accept corruption as the norm reflects the boldness required of leaders who challenge entrenched systems. He represents the transformative power of questioning the status quo and offering a vision for a better future. Evolutionary biology suggests that adaptability and the willingness to disrupt existing patterns are essential for survival and growth. Leaders who encourage innovation and challenge outdated practices can help their organizations evolve and remain competitive in dynamic environments. Learn how to lead innovation and disruption.A poster for Frank Capra's 1939 comedy-drama 'Mr Smith Goes To Washington', starring James Stewart ... (+) and Jean Arthur. (Photo by Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images) Getty Images Actionable Steps for Leaders from Mr. Smith Goes to Washington To embrace the leadership style exemplified by Jefferson Smith, consider these actionable steps: Define Your Purpose: Clearly articulate what you stand for and ensure your actions align with those values. Practice Resilience: Develop stress management techniques, such as mindfulness or journaling, to maintain focus under pressure. Hone Your Storytelling Skills: Use personal and organizational stories to inspire and align your team around shared goals. Lead with Integrity: Make ethical decisions and act consistently to build trust within your organization. Foster Innovation: Regularly question outdated practices and encourage your team to think creatively about new solutions. Jefferson Smith's story, though fictional, serves as a powerful reminder of what effective leadership looks like. By standing for a purpose greater than oneself, demonstrating courage, leveraging storytelling, leading with integrity, and challenging the status quo, leaders can navigate today's complexities with clarity and conviction. In a world that often prioritizes short-term gains, Smith's example calls leaders to focus on the lasting impact of their actions. The principles embodied in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington remain a timeless guide for those striving to make meaningful change.