

Autocracy on Film—*Gabriel Over the White House*

(1933, directed by Gregory La Cava)

OVERVIEW

What is the difference between a politician and a populist? Between a politician and a demagogue? When does demagoguery become a threat to democracy?

Judson Hammond is a fictional American president, whose political party is not named. The party expects their “boy” to do what they want him to do. A near-death experience changes Hammond. He wakes from a coma determined to do the greatest good for the greatest number, even if it means firing the cronies in his cabinet, dismissing Congress, declaring a national emergency and imposing martial law. For movie audiences both weary and fearful after years of the Great Depression and rampant gang warfare, a movie about a political leader who assumes authoritarian control—seemingly to benefit the populace—struck a chord. For some, that chord was hope; for others, a serious warning about the precarious fate of democracy.

Gabriel Over the White House challenges students to think about the power of the presidency and the Constitutional limitations of the office. By tapping their knowledge of the division of power among the three branches of government and the use of “executive privilege” and “martial law,” students not only will comprehend the movie’s message to audiences of the 1930s, but can also explore the film’s relevance in today’s political climate.

ENGAGE

Define political satire. *Satire* is a type of humor that uses irony, exaggeration and/or ridicule to criticize an individual, or a current social or economic situation. A *political satire* takes specific aim at elected officials and government policies. The goal of the satire may be to increase public awareness of the situation or to persuade public opinion. The humor is expressed not only through lines of dialogue, but also the situation in which the characters find themselves and how they react to those situations.

Discuss the meaning of a machine politician. A political “machine” is an organization in which a single powerful individual or a small group of people wield authority or influence over a larger group of followers. A machine politician is someone whose political beliefs and actions are dictated by, or in keeping with, the organization’s goals. Generally, the political machine’s own interest is the priority, rather than the interests of others who are not supporters. In exchange for support, the machine grants special favors such as appointments to public offices or protection from police. Overall, the phrases “political machine” and “machine politician” have negative connotations associated with corruption.

Encourage students to comment on contemporary satires they may have read or watched, such as *Saturday Night Live* sketches that have political allusions.

EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

Introduce the movie *Gabriel Over the White House*. Share the information below.

Judson Hammond is a fictional American president, whose political party is not named. The party expects their “boy” to do what they want him to do. Made during the Great Depression, the movie was controversial for this reason: Hammond suffers a near-death experience and awakens from a coma with a new mission—to solve the nation’s problems. To accomplish this, he fires the political cronies who got him elected to office and declares martial law. He becomes the sole leader of the United States government. Released soon after the presidential inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the movie seemingly advances the concept of totalitarianism over democracy.

Review the basic definition of a depiction. A *depiction* is a way of presenting information about a person, place, thing, or idea. Depictions are often, but not always, based on fact. The depiction itself, however, is not factual. *Cinematic depictions* are those created by filmmakers, and like all visual images, they have connotations that can be positive, negative, or neutral.

Display PPT slide 2: How Do Filmmakers Create Depictions? Analyzing cinematic depictions is an important critical-thinking skill. It requires a knowledge of framing and composition as well as other filmmaking devices, such as camera angles and distances, the use of lighting, and the soundtrack.

Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, “Taking the Oath of Office.”

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. In your opinion, why did the director decide to begin the movie with the president-elect taking the oath of office?

The presidential oath of office is more than mere ceremony. It is a statement that the elected official will defend the Constitution. All presidents take the oath. Not all keep that oath or interpret the oath in the same way. That is the subject of this film.

2. **Display PPT slide 3: Analyzing Cinematic Depictions—Taking the Oath of Office.** What is implied by the framing and composition of this image of Judson Hammond kissing the Bible during his inauguration? Is this a positive, negative, or neutral depiction of the character?

Draw students' attention to the composition within the frame, including the microphones and the people watching as Hammond repeats the oath. The gesture of kissing the Bible suggests that Hammond is an honest man who sincerely intends to uphold his oath of office. The swearing in of a president in a democracy in serious business, and Americans are watching and listening. Interpretations of the connotation will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.

3. The scenes following the inaugural parade include several comments about how Hammond got elected. The statements are made in casual conversation, followed by laughter. But they are examples of political satire. Explain the political subtext of each statement below.

- a) Hammond says good night to the vice president, adding, "I hope you sleep well." He replies, "When did a vice president ever do anything else?"

This suggests that the office of vice president is ceremonial rather than a critical position in the line of executive leadership.

- b) Hammond expresses some anxiety over all the campaign promises he made to the people. The party leader responds, "You had to make some promises. By the time they realize you're not going to keep them, your term will be over."

All politicians make promises knowing they may not be able to keep them. Their laughter suggests that fooling the American people in this way is of little concern.

- c) Hammond thanks a congressman for "those unexpected votes from Alabama" and the man replies, "Wait 'til you get the bill for them!"

The votes from Alabama were bought, not provided because of any real effort on the congressman's part to convince the people that Hammond was the best man. Rather, he is the man that the party wanted.

- d) Hammond tells another politician how thankful he is for his support in securing Hammond's election. The politician replies, "Don't mention it. You'll make the best president the party ever had."

The statement reinforces the concept of a machine politician —that is, the president serving his party rather than his country.

Think more about it. What do you think the filmmaker intended to convey in this scene?

Interpretations will vary. Overall, the scene depicts politicians as self-serving, if not corrupt. As political satire, this scene ridicules the politicians and their political party.

Introduce the second screening activity. Once Hammond is sworn into office, he appoints Miss Molloy as his personal private secretary. In this scene, Miss Molloy—who he calls Pandy—presents documents for the president to sign. Their meeting is interrupted by the arrival of the president’s nephew (introduced to the audience in the first screening).

Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, “The Oval Office.”

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. Miss Molloy suggests that Hammond could do “important things” with his pen. His response is to call her an idealist. What does this suggest about Hammond?
Responses will vary. Some students may say Hammond either does not believe he can or isn’t willing to do important things independent of the party. Draw students’ attention to Hammond’s line of dialogue: “The party has a plan. I’m just a member of the party.”

Prompt deeper critical thinking by asking what the reference to the feather pen suggests about Hammond. Interpretations will vary but should focus on the main idea that Miss Malloy is comparing Hammond’s power to Abraham Lincoln’s power to free the slaves. Like the depiction of Hammond taking the oath of office (**PPT slide 3**), Miss Malloy is emphasizing the vital importance of the role of the President of the United States. Hammond, however, barely reads the documents he signs.

2. When Hammond’s nephew arrives, the president initiates a game of “treasure hunt.” Discuss how his behavior with his nephew reinforces the idea that Hammond is a “machine politician.”
Interpretations will vary. Focus students’ attention on the soundtrack, specifically the radio broadcast of breaking news. This is about the dire situation of the nation’s poor. Hammond is oblivious to the broadcast. Visually, he crawls on his knees with his nephew, an action that communicates his childishness and naivety.

Think more about it. Refer to PPT slide 4: Analyzing Cinematic Depictions—The Oval Office. How does the Oval Office scene depict the president? Why do you think the director ended the scene with a shot of the nephew sitting behind the president’s desk, stuffing marshmallows into his mouth?

Responses will vary but should focus on the main idea of political satire. Playing with a child in the Oval Office is not necessarily a negative thing, but in juxtaposition with the scenes that preceded this—Lincoln’s feather pen, for example—and set against the broadcast about an “army” of disgruntled citizens pleading for help from the White House,

the scene communicates a critical weakness of Hammond's presidency. The final shot of the nephew may be humorous, but it makes an association that the president himself is a child, as least in his approach to his obligations to the American people. Accept all reasonable responses.

Before screening the third and final scene from the movie, review the definition of impeachment. A basic understanding of the political terminology of impeachment is necessary for students to best comprehend the scene they will screen. Share the information below.

- First, share with students the passage from the U.S. Constitution, Article II, section 4.

"The President, Vice President and all Civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors."

- Next, share this information on the process of impeachment, as published on the "History, Art & Archives" website of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Constitution gives the House of Representatives the sole power to impeach an official, and it makes the Senate the sole court for impeachment trials. The power of impeachment is limited to removal from office but also provides a means by which a removed officer may be disqualified from holding future office.

The House brings impeachment charges against federal officials as part of its oversight and investigatory responsibilities.

- Finally, review the Tenure of Office Act.

When this movie was made in 1933, only one American president had been impeached. On February 24, 1868, the House impeached Andrew Johnson. Among the charges against him was violating the Tenure of Office Act. This was based on an 1867 law that prevented a president from firing a member of his cabinet without Senate approval. Johnson had fired his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. The Senate, however, acquitted Johnson by just one vote. Therefore, although impeached, Andrew Johnson remained in office.

In 1926, the Supreme Court ruled that the Tenure of Office Act was unconstitutional. As a result, the president could fire individuals he himself appointed. Although the president could fire a cabinet member, he or she could not fire an individual who had been elected to office—for example, a senator, a congressional representative, or a state governor.

Introduce the screening. This segment comes quite a bit later in the movie. Earlier, President Hammond had crashed his car while driving recklessly at a high speed. Critically injured, he lies in a coma. Miraculously, or so it seems, he survives. He awakens as a significantly changed man. He remains isolated for some time, contemplating how he will proceed as president, and ultimately decides to run the government without interference from “the party.”

Display PPT slide 5: Notice of Termination. Hammond’s first step is to fire every member of his cabinet. This both stuns and angers the political machine that put him in office as a puppet president. They ultimately decide that Hammond has overstepped his presidential authority and begin discussions of impeachment.

Screen *Gabriel Over the White House*, “Dictatorship or Patriotism?” Recommended discussion questions are below.

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. Why do the party members demand Hammond’s impeachment?
The party is no longer able to control him or his power as president. To save themselves and their own political ambitions, they wish to remove Hammond from office. But Hammond is one step ahead of them. He enters the Senate Chamber unexpectedly.
2. How do the members of Congress react when Hammond enters the chamber? What can you infer from their reaction?
Their raucous shouting ceases and they stand. This indicates that they may not like Hammond, but they do respect the office of the president. As the scene continues, they murmur and remain standing as the president crosses the room to the podium. As Hammond speaks, the room is generally quiet.
3. What does Hammond ask of Congress?
Four billion dollars to stimulate the economy. When he learns of a movement to impeach him, he withdraws his request for money and instead asks the Congress to declare a state of national emergency until normal conditions are restored. He adjourns Congress and assumes full control of the country.
4. How does Hammond respond when accused of being a dictator?
He argues his intention is for the good of the country and cites Thomas Jefferson’s definition of democracy as a government of the greatest good for the greatest number. Some students may also note that Hammond accuses the Congress of having given up on democracy by ignoring the needs of the American people.

5. **Refer to PPT slides 6 and 7.** Recommended discussion points are below.

- **PPT slide 6: Analyzing Cinematic Depictions—Addressing Congress.** Encourage students to discuss the framing and composition of this image and to interpret its connotation. The camera is placed at a distance so that the viewer sees Hammond at the podium as he addresses Congress. This long shot shows that Hammond is in the center of the frame with the American flag fully displayed behind him.

Although interpretations will vary, this composition and Hammond's raised fist suggest both the power of the office and of his presidency. Accept all reasonable responses.

- **PPT slide 7: Contrasting Depictions.** When first sworn into office (and before his car accident), the movie depicted Hammond as naïve, childlike, relying on the party to direct his actions (left image). This depiction changes once Hammond recovers from his accident and takes the reins of government (right image). Explain how the framing and composition of these two shots communicate this change in Hammond.

*Again, students' responses will vary. Some may note the image in the Oval Office includes a small bust of Abraham Lincoln, seemingly looking down on Hammond as he crawls with his nephew as they hunt for marshmallows. Placement of the Lincoln statue is intentional, suggesting Hammond's behavior is beneath (literally, in the composition) the importance of the office. In contrast, the image on the right shows Hammond in the Senate Chamber, leaning forward on the podium with the American flag behind him. He looks confident and purposeful. The camera is placed closer to him than it was in the shot on **PPT slide 6**, enabling the viewer to observe more closely his serious facial expression.*

Think more about it. In your opinion, is this scene a defense of democracy or a plea for benevolent dictatorship? Answers will vary. *Although members of Congress applaud the senator when he says Congress is not ready to give up the government of our fathers, i.e., democracy, a few moments later, they applaud Hammond's definition of democracy—a government that does the greatest good for the greatest number, even if that means dictatorship.*

Emphasize this key point: There is no right or wrong answer to this question. The movie allows the audience to interpret and infer, and not all viewers will agree on the movie's overall message. This was true when the movie was released in 1933 and remains so even today.

Conclude the lesson. Some movie critics at the time were alarmed because of the film's focus on a totalitarian take-over of America. Writing in *The Nation*, William Troy stated the film could "convert innocent American movie audiences to a policy of Fascist dictatorship in

this country.” On the other hand, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt quite liked the movie, reportedly watching it in the White House three times. “It would do a lot of good,” he said.

A key point to ask students to consider is this: Did the term “dictatorship” have the same connotation in 1933 as it does today?

Share the additional information below.

In 2018, Journalist Jeff Greenfield described the movie’s relevance to the present-day in this way:

The disastrous conditions in the United States in 1933 may have made Hammond’s “benevolent dictatorship” appealing, but the movie should alert us to the unhappy reality that disillusion with a deliberative, slow-moving political process can raise doubts even without a Great Depression. In particular, younger citizens in recent years—both in the U.S. and elsewhere—have expressed increasing skepticism about democracy and an increasingly favorable view of the idea of a “strongman” leader, even one prepared to scrap some of the core elements of a free society.

ASK: The movie is reflective of America in an earlier time. Although you have not seen the entire film, do you think the concept of an authoritarian president remains relevant to America’s political situation today?

Teacher’s note: For background information on the historical period in which the film was produced, teachers may wish to read “**The Tenor of the Times—Dictator Talk and FDR**” (included as a resource for this lesson). This article by journalist Jonathan Alter presents evidence of political climate that supported giving broad executive powers to the newly elected president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The article can also be assigned as independent reading for older students.