

10-16-2006

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Bulkeley Goldsmith, Laura, "Death of a President" (2006). *Features*. 36.  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/36>

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## Death of a President

By Laura Bulkeley Goldsmith

Is the new film Death of a President (2006) based on William Manchester's classic (if dated) treatment of John F. Kennedy's assassination?

Or does it refer to John Tyler's 1841 elevation to president following the death -- from complications following a cold -- of William Henry Harrison (whose term of 30 days, 11 hours and 30 minutes ranks as the nation's shortest)?

Or when never-elected-in-his-own-right-but-signed-The-Fugitive-Slave-Act-anyway Millard Filmore took over when Zachary "Old Rough and Ready" Taylor died of acute gastroenteritis in 1850?

Or when soon to be impeached Andrew Johnson succeeded the immortal Abraham Lincoln in 1865?

Or when the assassinated James A. Garfield -- who lingered from July 2 to September 19, 1881 -- was followed by Chester "The Father of Civil Service" Arthur?

Surely it must be about Theodore Roosevelt's ascension unto a Mount Rushmore worthy presidency following the assassination of William "splendid little war" McKinley.

Or when ill health took the life of former Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding after only 27 months and Calvin "minding my own business" Coolidge succeeded him.

**Actually, none of the above.**

The title refers to a new 90-minute film, a pseudo documentary that portrays the assassination of the United States sitting president, George W. Bush. Press reports indicate that the film opens with a depiction of Bush cut down by a sniper while exiting a hotel just hours after driving past an anti-war demonstration in Chicago, taking place in October 2007. In the wake of the assassination, authorities' primary suspect is a Syrian-born man who is hunted down without any conclusive evidence following a rush to judgment by the media. According to a spokesman for the film, "In the hunt for the killer, this will show how America has been affected by the War on Terror... It is about the polarisation of America in all the events post 9/11."

Using computer-generated images mixed with live actors plus archival footage, the filmmakers leave no doubt that they aim for a haunting verisimilitude. As part of its publicity campaign, Britain's digital channel More4 released a still from the film depicting the moment Mr. Bush is shot. The black and white photograph, which has been reprinted extensively in British newspapers, depicts "Bush," collapsing into the arms of a Secret Service man, surrounded by horrified onlookers and photographers. Just looking at the picture alone immediately conjures up frightening images of John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan.

Yet Peter Dale, the head of More4 (which will air the film next month), said the film is not deliberately lurid and certainly does not promote Bush's assassination. "It has the combination of a gripping forensic narrative and also some very thought-provoking places where you are encouraged to think about the issues behind the narrative." While More4 is a digital channel in Britain, a future airing is scheduled for Channel 4 in England, which is the BBC's main commercial competitor.

The film was written and directed by Gabriel Range. Range's last TV film, "The Man Who Broke England" (2004), focused on the collapse of the British economy. While the disaster in this film seems to point to a terrorist plot, it is soon revealed to be the work of the ineptitude and greed of a city trader. In 2003 he directed and co-wrote "The Day Britain Stopped," about the breakdown of England's public transportation system, shot in the same fictional documentary style.

Death of a President premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2006, where Channel 4 secured an American distributor, New Market Films. Festival organizers say the movie "contributes meaningfully to the public discourse surrounding current social issues.... The film is not exploitative in any way and treats what would certainly be a great tragedy respectfully and un-cynically. In the tradition of great cautionary tales, a terrible and horrifying event unveils certain aspects of society's current fears and future trends."

Canadian's AFP writer, Guillaume Lavallee, writes that the film "explore(s) the loss of civil liberties, the ramifications of war and the manipulation of mass media."

There has always existed a lively debate about the proprieties that exist regarding the president of the United States, in terms of every media. Should the press have covered up Franklin D. Roosevelt's disability? (They did.) How far should the producers of Ike, a TV movie about Dwight Eisenhower, have gone with regard to his relationship with Kay Summersby? (Pretty far.) Should reporters have fully delved into and exposed the unsavory aspects of the personal life of John F. Kennedy? (Not until years after his death.)

In both the book and its film version of The Final Days, as well as in Oliver Stone's Nixon, their creators went to great lengths to expose a weakened and broken Richard Nixon. It was "the public's right to know" every detail, no matter how explicit, of Bill Clinton's encounter with Monica Lewinsky.

As seen from the treatment of FDR (during his lifetime) to that of Clinton, few would argue that the days of any blind reverence towards our political leaders are over. Even a largely beloved president is now beleaguered: in the mainstream press, on broadcast and cable television, on talk radio, on the internet, and of course, by his opposing party.

But clearly, Death of a President marks a new day. Showing in elaborate authenticity the assassination of a sitting U.S. president at any time, especially during wartime, crosses a line. Never mind of good taste. Taste and discretion no longer come into play, which has been established. This is a form of propaganda that is beyond brilliant. It would make Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein weep with envy.

Assassinate your president IN THE FUTURE -- but, essentially, NOW. It is not a "cautionary" tale because it becomes the new reality, happening in the present (today), under the guise of the "future." Perhaps Range is a genius who doesn't even understand what he is doing (doubtful), but clearly he is opening an explosive door. This Bush is not fiction. He is a dead president, "future perfect" tense. The film is inflammatory. Death of a President is the death of all presidents. Nothing is sacred.

*"Death of a President" will open in U.S. theatres on October 27. It also won the International Critics Award at the Toronto Film Festival.*



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