

Politics and Pop Culture: Citizenship, Satire, and Social Change

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It is an honor and privilege to be here. Since I began my academic career as a political scientist at a sister Church of the Brethren institution, and my father's first academic appointment was right here at Juniata, this is an especially welcome and meaningful visit.

Tonight's presentation will focus on the power and potential of pop culture—particularly via satire and documentary film—to understand and debate the merits and deficiencies of our political institutions, processes, and broader system, and to engage citizens and students that otherwise may not be as inclined to be active participants in socio-political discussions and debates. Of course, after experiencing Dr. Barlow's and Dr. Plane's classes today, I can see that having engaged, informed, and interested citizens is not an issue here at Juniata, as we had outstanding discussions. Thank you for the energy, interest, and insights.

I have some brief introductory remarks about the relationship and significance of politics and pop culture, and then I will proceed with presenting selected clips from documentary films and satire from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. I will conclude by talking about the promise, the long-term promise, of employing film and pop culture as practical and enlightened tools to understand, appreciate, and navigate through the complexities, possibilities, and challenges of contemporary U.S. politics. This will hopefully provide a clearer sense of how works from popular culture can serve as tools for civic engagement, policy advocacy, and perhaps social change.

WHY POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE? MESSAGES, FRAMES OF REFERENCE, THE HOLLYWOOD-WASHINGTON CONNECTION, AND SOCIALIZATION

I want to begin with some rather rudimentary but necessary introductory remarks, as there are no doubt some folks out there in the audience and certainly in my discipline who wonder why we should study politics and pop culture in a serious manner, devoting classes, conferences, journals, and blogs to the academic, intellectual, and civic merits of such an enterprise. After all, isn't film just about escapism,

popcorn, and an affordable air conditioning summer getaway? Most certainly it is, but it's also much more than that—and indeed, it always has been.

So why do we study politics and pop culture? For starters, to be cognizant of the political messages presented through films, television programs, and other works. This means being a critical viewer and consumer of media, detecting the relevant messages, implicit and explicit, in film and television. Second, for the wide range of meaningful frames of reference that pop culture provides citizens—from water coolers to war zones. Why do I use that alliteration? Think about the way we talk with each other every day. Whether an MBA, PhD, rocket scientist, laborer, lawyer, cook, teacher, or someone just standing around the water cooler talking to a friend or classmate or coworker, we often use pop culture references to explain our experiences, perceptions, and points of view, from the mundane to the profound. Whether quoting from Shakespeare, Jon Stewart, *Star Trek*, or *The Simpsons*, our frames of reference may express something about our work, religion, families, and politics, among other matters. To quote from particular characters, television shows, plays, and movies relates back to the argument that the language of stories that we repeat year after year, decade after decade, can reveal a deeper meaning, drawing upon pop culture material that has become part of our collective memory.

We can use a short but illustrative reference from a film or comedian as a means of expressing something more profound or complex, or to provide specific context. For example, you might recall Secretary of State Hillary Clinton earlier this year when she was testifying before the House Foreign Relations Committee about the deadly September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. At one key moment, when she was trying to express just how unnerved and dramatic, stressful and chaotic the scene was in Benghazi—and yet also convey the effectiveness and limitations of public servants and Marines in difficult and dire circumstances—she referenced a specific scene in *Argo*, the Academy Award winning film from 2012. For Secretary Clinton, citing a key, dramatic sequence from the film—the manic destroying of classified documents as the U.S. Embassy was under siege—was an efficient method of communicating a broader point with a quick pop culture reference. Thus, *Argo* became shorthand for expressing a perspective about the performance of diplomatic and military actors in fluid, chaotic circumstances abroad.¹

Another recent example of employing a pop culture reference to make a larger political point comes from then-U.S. Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004 and current secretary of state. During his foreign policy speech at the Democratic Convention in 2012, he cited *Rocky IV* (1985) as a means to attack the foreign policy acumen of the Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney. Rather than going into an overly wonkish or laborious stretch of forgettable rhetoric on a national stage, Kerry employed *Rocky IV* to mock Romney's foreign policy credentials and worldview; it was a way to intimate that Romney saw U.S. interests and international relations through the lens of a

bygone bipolar era. And if you were one of the millions of Americans who followed the travails and triumphs of Sylvester Stallone's iconic Rocky Balboa on screen, cable, or the Internet from 1976-2006, and especially 1985's Cold War-era *Rocky IV*, you likely surmised Kerry was mocking the preparedness, sophistication, and foreign policy bona fides of Romney. The Republican adversary, therefore, was not tethered to the nuances of contemporary international relations, but was unduly influenced by the caricatured Hollywood portrayal of cold war tensions.²

Lastly, regarding the "war zones" aspect of "water coolers to war zones," recall that Gen. Stanley McChrystal—the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan and architect of counter-insurgency policy who was relieved of his military duties by President Obama after an unflattering and provocative exposé in *Rolling Stone*—and his close aides allegedly wore *Team America: World Police* patches from the infamous 2004 Trey Parker and Matt Stone film. The satirical puppet-based film evidently resonated in some way with the general and his associates, and his cadre's donning of the *Team America* gear illustrates that even those in the highest echelons of the military chain of command reference films to make a larger point. In this case, one might surmise the *Team America* patches provided a symbolic commentary on the indispensability of American military might and ingenuity in a dangerous world. Regardless of their precise intent, *Team America* evidently resonated with the decorated general and his colleagues.³

THE HOLLYWOOD-WASHINGTON CONNECTION (AND ISSUE ADVOCACY) AND SOCIALIZATION

In his book *Here's Looking at You*, political scientist Ernest Giglio writes about the Hollywood-Washington connection—the multiple significant ways Hollywood and Washington have been connected over the past century-plus.⁴ This intersection of the political and entertainment worlds is reflected in several forms—fundraising for candidates and parties, advocating for specific policies and causes, running for elected office, and supporting war efforts—and both sides of the ideological aisle have been a part of this long-term relationship. In terms of monetary support, the modern Democratic Party has a number of major donors, from Jeffrey Katzenberg and Steven Spielberg to David Geffen, Barbra Streisand, and Tom Hanks, among a slew of others. And certainly Republicans have their well-established pool of financial support for their candidates and causes. It is interesting to note that for an artistic community that is generally socially liberal, so many of the most prominent elected officials that have come from the entertainment industry have been Republicans, among them the California governor and later U.S. president Ronald Reagan and the Carmel, California, mayor Clint Eastwood—a long time, libertarian-leaning Republican. (We all remember him and his infamous chair from the 2012 Republican National Convention, and *Saturday Night Live*'s Bill Hader parodying said chair and actor.) In addition,

Republicans in Congress have included the likes of Sonny Bono and Fred Grandy (Gopher from the 1970s-80s TV show *The Love Boat*). On the left, there is the U.S. senator from Minnesota, Al Franken, a longtime liberal satirist, screenwriter, and radio host on Air America who worked at *Saturday Night Live* for a few decades and authored—and acted in—some of the most popular political sketches in that program’s history.

In addition to running for or serving in office, famous faces from the film industry have been actively engaged in myriad policy areas, seeking to bring about changes in public policy or building awareness around significant national and international issues, crises, or injustices. There are far too many to cite here this evening, but I will mention just a few recent examples: Matt Damon’s co-founded organization Water.org, which draws attention to the issue of access to clean water; George Clooney’s efforts to address war and human rights abuses in Darfur; and Mark Ruffalo’s opposition to the practice of fracking (or “hydraulic fracturing”) of natural gas. And of course for decades, Hollywood icon Charlton Heston, former president of the NRA, advocated for gun rights, lobbying Congress, the White House, and state and local governments to resist an array of gun safety and control measures. And let’s not forget the work of prominent Washington figures that have used their stature to advocate and educate. First Ladies have harnessed pop culture icons to draw attention to their causes. First Lady Nancy Reagan spearheaded her “Just Say No” anti-drugs campaign in the 1980s and appeared on *Diff’rent Strokes* and *Silver Spoons*, popular young adult sitcoms of that era. Presently, First Lady Michelle Obama has been engaged in persistent outreach with the entertainment industry—including Will Ferrell, among others—to promote healthy eating habits and exercise with her “Let’s Move!” campaign to reduce childhood obesity.⁵

Another aspect of the Hollywood-Washington connection is the longstanding link during wartime. From World War I to World War II and to the present day, members of the Hollywood community have been involved in raising money for the war effort (selling war bonds, for example) and promoting American exceptionalism and unity of purpose in a variety of ways. Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* informational (propaganda) film series during World War II stands out as a prominent example of such efforts. After the September 11th terrorist attacks, Jack Valenti, then head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and former aide to President Lyndon Johnson, came to the White House and pledged his and the industry’s support to President George W. Bush and a grieving nation, with a prominent display of pop culture solidarity on the Rose Garden.

And finally, we study politics and pop culture because of its role in political socialization, the inter-generational transmission of values about politics, the lifelong process by which we acquire our political values. Socialization helps us to understand why we’re liberals, conservatives, libertarians, and socialists and why we’re apathetic or engaged in the political process. Film and pop culture, as major

components of media, are thus agents of socialization that—consciously and subconsciously—shape our view of politics and the role of government. Even when we might think we’re not absorbing these messages, myths, and details, we are. And in this regard, I want to briefly mention Hollywood icon John Wayne, an outspoken conservative for decades. In 1966 he wrote a letter to President Lyndon Johnson, asserting that film was the most influential medium of the day, and thus to turn the tide of public opinion that was increasingly against the Vietnam war, a film that supported U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia would be beneficial. Wayne sought and received approval from the Pentagon to have their explicit support for his film *The Green Berets* (1968), an unabashedly pro-troop, pro-war, anti-media vehicle. Wayne’s letter and film, and the latter’s overt political advocacy, are an acknowledgment that pop culture, as a core component of the media landscape, is an agent of socialization that has the potential to influence public opinion.

WHAT MAKES A POLITICAL FILM? CRITERIA AND CATEGORIES

But what makes a film political? This can be difficult to answer because so many films carry implicit messages even if they aren’t deemed explicitly political. Moreover, the intent of the filmmakers may not mesh with its ultimate effect on the audience, given the myriad variables that individuals bring to the table when interpreting such works. The filmmaker or artist may have a particular view of what effect they want that film to have on the public, but of course, for studios and distributors the primary dynamic of concern is the product’s viability in the marketplace; this is a money-making enterprise, not a charity. With niche programming, an array of demographic challenges (and opportunities), and ever-changing media platforms, there is incredible pressure for the shows and movies to make money. Moreover, a writer, performer, or filmmaker may have a particular view of how she or he wants the viewer to think about social and economic justice, racism, war, peace, life and death, and so forth. But those of us who consume the film all come to the table with our own biases and experiences; therefore, we may interpret the films differently than anticipated by the filmmaker.

For example, today in your classes and on an individual basis we have been talking about *Blazing Saddles* (1974). People can react very differently to that film, right? Clearly, Mel Brooks and his brilliant writing partners wanted the film to be successful, and that meant making it hilarious. But the other intent was to show racial prejudice and hypocrisy, to turn the western myth and film genre on its head – satirizing the nobility and morality of our westward expansion and our notion of a fair and equal “melting pot.” As Mel Brooks said recently in a PBS *American Masters* special, and I am perhaps paraphrasing somewhat, “Racial prejudice is the glue that holds the film together.” On the other hand, might some casual bigots or entrenched racists love the film and the use of the N-word? Norman Lear’s classic 1970s sitcom *All in the Family* is another case of potential intent-effect problems.

Nonetheless, political scientists such as Michael Genovese and Ernest Giglio have come up with some useful criteria for what makes a film political, while acknowledging that these standards are inherently incomplete given the complex intent-effect relationship.⁶

First, does the work serve as a vehicle for domestic or international propaganda? Leni Riefenstahl's film for the Third Reich, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and Frank Capra's films for the war department leading up to WWII, the *Why We Fight* series, would fit in this category. Even Walt Disney made informational films for the U.S. military. Second, is the film's major intention to bring about political change? Third, is the film designed to support the existing political, economic, or social system? Some studies of socialization and pop culture and politics indicate that many of these messages tend to reinforce values that are shared by the majority of Americans. Thus, if the film or show is set to support economic liberalism, capitalism, individualism, the notion of rags to riches, religious expression, etc., that could very well be a political film, even if the work is ostensibly within the western, science fiction, or other genre.⁷

Categories of political film include film as ideology (presenting a clear, distinct view about the proper purpose and scope of government); film as propaganda (either receiving governmental support or deliberately manipulating audience emotions by leaving out conflicting data and arguments); and film as political history (depicting a specific historical era or event). The latter category would include D.W. Griffith's landmark and controversial silent epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which depicted a South oppressed by the North and freed slaves, ultimately emancipated by the KKK. Another example is *Mississippi Burning* (1988) from director Alan Parker, which takes its title from the FBI investigation into the murders of civil rights workers Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney during 1964's Freedom Summer. Certainly the recent Steve McQueen film, *Twelve Years a Slave*, the story of Solomon Northrup, is an example of film as political history. And if you get a chance to see this incredibly powerful movie please do so, as it's presenting a different view of that era and the slave trade and certainly does not pull any punches about the economic, psychological, physical, and moral ramifications of slavery.⁸ Also note, however, as engaged and critical consumers of film and television, that when it comes to presenting political history via pop culture, obviously there can be minor or wild inaccuracies given the perspectives of the filmmaker and, most importantly, the need to make the work entertaining and palatable to a mass audience.

SATIRE, DOCUMENTARY CINEMA, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

What I'd like to focus on now is the role of satire and documentary films in advancing policies and critiquing our political system, which Jon Stewart and his team of writers do on an almost nightly basis, and to identify some of the specific critiques, grievances, and policies in recent weeks and years

The Daily Show has promoted. Clearly, critiquing the political media, especially cable news networks, as being “out of order” and focused on trivia, conflict, and sensationalism, has been a dominant theme since Stewart came on board in 1999. CNN is attacked and mocked. Fox News is lampooned and ridiculed. And despite the show’s liberal bent on most matters of economic and social justice, the “Lean Forward” left cable network MSNBC also receives criticism. But no media institution faces the show’s satirical wrath and inspires its rants more than Fox News. Much like Paddy Chayefsky’s prophetic *Network* (1976), *The Daily Show* critiques our inadequate media, too often driven by profits and sensationalism rather than informing the public.

In addition to this foundational message, delivered through biting satirical segments, interviews, and commentary, the court jester Stewart critiques our political system as dysfunctional, hyper-partisan, and polarized, and our broader culture and political leaders (and yes, the hyperbolic messages emanating from cable media personalities) as hypocritical and . . . not helpful. And so here’s exhibit A of satire addressing the state of the immigration debate, where reform efforts had been stymied in Congress. In this segment from correspondent Aasif Mandvi we see two common approaches from *The Daily Show* at work. On one hand, there is a focus on one specific public policy dilemma and advocacy for constructive, evidence-based government action to address the problem. On the other hand, the interview portion lampoons the interview subject—here an anti-illegal immigration activist and filmmaker—as extreme, intolerant, and detrimental to common sense policy and progress.⁹

“The Two Faces of Illegal Immigration,” *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-october-10-2013/the-two-faces-of-illegal-immigration>.

There we have a quintessential *Daily Show* piece advocating for action on a major vexing public policy matter—in this case, devising some way to reform the immigration system to allow people that came here illegally to become citizens and to not separate families and so forth—while highlighting how hyperbolic and ideological extremes, inflamed by media and activists, hinder our attempts at common ground and policy making. In addition, this piece also suggests the peril of relying solely on documentaries for our data and reality, in part illustrated here by the documentary filmmaker Mr. Lynch who doesn’t believe in academic research and data when forming opinions and formulating policy. The extremes of the immigration debate, from *The Daily Show*’s perspective, indicate that we continue to be ill-served by a polarized system where it is hard for good people to compromise, and thus, to accomplish big things.

This message—the inability of our political institutions to act rationally and efficiently to serve those in need (be they veterans, the poor, or immigrants, etc.)—is perhaps most dramatically on display

when it comes to the issue of providing medical assistance and financial assistance to the first responders after 9/11. These are individuals, praised by Stewart, that have faced myriad maladies, including pneumonia, asthma, cancer, and so forth. Yet legislation aimed at providing for their care had lingered in Congress for some time, in part derailed by legislative gimmicks, polarization, and the inability to compromise. And so here's a segment from *The Daily Show* called "Worst Responders," where Stewart criticizes Congress's unwillingness to do right by the selfless citizens who were the first responders at the World Trade Center site in New York City, taking aim at, among other things, the Senate's use of the filibuster to stymie the legislation:¹⁰

"Worst Responders," *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, December 16, 2010, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-december-16-2010/worst-responders>.

"9/11 First Responders React to the Senate Filibuster," *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, December 16, 2010, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-december-16-2010/9-11-first-responders-react-to-the-senate-filibuster>.

Jon Stewart then dedicated the rest of his program to chatting with several first responders to 9/11. In another episode devoted to the plight of the ailing workers and outrage over legislative inaction and cruel political recalcitrance, Stewart interviewed U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) about the specific legislation. This bill was looked upon as dead by many political insiders. Within a few weeks after this segment with Gillibrand aired, there was finally decisive action in Congress. I'm not saying *The Daily Show* deserves all of the credit for breaking a logjam in Congress, but the persistent issue advocacy from the program was part of the larger dialogue, the political-cultural milieu, emphasizing this matter in the public consciousness. And of course, as we usually see on *The Daily Show*, there was ample outrage aimed at the cable media for not adequately covering an issue of public health and moral significance.

THE COLBERT REPORT

We are running out of time for our satire and issue advocacy segment, but Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report* have likewise occasionally been part of explicit public policy education and advocacy. Not to the extent of its sister program on Comedy Central, perhaps, but involved nonetheless. One example is when Stephen Colbert participated in a challenge by the president of the United Farm Workers, Arturo Rodriguez, in which the labor leader asked Americans to sign up for farm labor jobs. Rodriguez issued the invitation in light of criticism of immigrant workers taking American jobs. As so few accepted the United Farm Workers' invitation, Stephen Colbert stepped up and joined immigrant workers in the fields of California for a day, illustrating the hard work and sacrifice that put vegetables and fruit on our tables. Colbert's day in the fields was of course covered in a topical segment on the show.

But perhaps most surprising, the faux-conservative blowhard talk show host also testified before a House agriculture committee while remaining in character, albeit in a slightly toned-down form, about the plight of farm workers and his experiences as a farm worker for a day. Colbert had evidently been invited by Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA). At one pivotal point during his testimony, however, something exceedingly rare occurred: Colbert dropped his fake conservative persona for a small portion of his time, speaking eloquently about how we treat the women and men who come to the U.S. and who work incredibly hard to provide for their families and our national sustenance. Not unlike his short-lived fake campaign for president in the 2012 South Carolina primaries—which featured a major “rally” with former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain—Colbert’s congressional appearance drew considerable criticism across the political spectrum (though a little more on the right) and media intelligentsia, but praise from others, particularly those in the labor movement and on the political left. Colbert breaking his larger-than-life on-screen character for a cause is significant; it’s satire for a purpose.

Now a few thoughts on the potential for social change and education through documentary films such as *Bully* (2011).

HISTORY LESSONS, EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE, AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

Documentaries have the potential to provide a very rich opportunity to address a whole series of socio-political issues in a more comprehensive way because they are not constrained by many of the variables that hinder commercial films because they have to get people in the seats, namely, formulaic plots, the necessity of a star actor, blowing things up, awesome special effects, romance, forced or abrupt happy endings, and so forth. I want to show you a clip from a documentary called *These Amazing Shadows* (2011) which is about the American Film Institute (AFI) and their setting aside of a few films every year for film preservation. It is part of a Library of Congress program, legislation that was passed in the late 1980s, and here Steve James (director of *Hoop Dreams*, 1994) talks about the unique power of documentary films to engage, provoke, and connect us to vital realities:

There’s nothing more powerful than a true story, because it makes you feel like you don’t have that escape valve that I have when I watch fiction; when it gets too tough or too close or too emotional I can always back out of it, just a little bit, by saying: “this isn’t true.” And when you are seeing a powerful documentary and you believe what you’re seeing, you don’t have that—and that’s a good thing.

And that leads to a consideration of the profound social change possibilities presented by *Bully* (2011), one of the more important recent documentary films. The documentary, which chronicles the real life struggles of children facing verbal, physical, and psychological abuse in school, has helped galvanize parents, teachers, administrators, state legislatures, and even the U.S. Department of Education,

harnessing public and private resources to promote open dialogue and establish coalitions to deal with, and combat, bullying in schools. Very quickly, here is the trailer for *Bully* from 2012. And then we will talk about it in terms of its utility in mobilizing a variety of public and private sector forces:

Trailer for *Bully* (2011):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1g9RV9OKhg>

A very clear example that the impact of *Bully* is moving beyond just rank and file moviegoers and elite film critics to communities across this country is the work going on in rural and urban school districts, often regardless of political ideologies and so forth. And what you've seen popping up across the country are chapters of The Bully Project. The Project involves efforts by school administrators, teachers, and parents to identify bullying activity and then to try to find concrete ways to deal with it through comprehensive mediation and counseling services. One personal anecdote illustrates the educational and legislative impact of *Bully* and its potential for effecting social change: A few days ago as I was changing some of this presentation, I received an email from one of my political science students. He said:

Dr. Yenerall can you please announce that we're showing *Bully* next week as part of social equity week, and we're going to have mediation and counseling services there. We're going to have people from the local living shelter there; we're going to have opportunities for people to meet with these mental and psychological health and educational professionals afterward. And, we want to talk about legislation in Pennsylvania.

Right now, in the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives there is legislation stuck in committee called the "Pennsylvania Safe Schools Act"—or PASS—introduced in 2012, and which is one part of a larger national movement to try to codify and institutionalize outreach efforts for people who are bullied across the country. Pennsylvania already has some anti-bullying measures on the books, so to speak, but in the aftermath of this film, there has been a move to clarify, expand, and improve upon current policy. Moreover, many screenings of *Bully* include panels that embrace outreach to crucial social services, mental health professionals, public safety figures, teachers, and school administrators. Here is President Obama commending the film and its director, Lee Hirsch, for raising public consciousness, as well as an Anderson Cooper interview with students that have been bullied, providing a national stage to present these dynamics.

President Obama acknowledges Lee Hirsch:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mv3ubds1MTg>.

The Bully Project:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBymTVjBYHg>.

Anderson Cooper:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yma1IcUpvJI>.

The final example I want to give in terms of the power of documentaries to promote social change—and there are dozens of them—is Kirby Dick’s explosive, disturbing, and highly-influential *The Invisible War* (2012). *The Invisible War* was shown to members of the House and the Senate and their staffs in Washington; it was screened by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta at the Pentagon; it was shown at political film festivals at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in 2012. And it also aired nationwide on PBS and is being screened at college campuses across the United States. And now, it’s available through streaming media and old school DVDs. I can’t recommend this film enough. Revelatory, unsettling, inspirational, and immensely educational, it is meant not only to inform but to press for action, to bring about policy changes in how the military adjudicates sexual assault, particularly when it comes to the primary role of unit commanders in the process.

And without getting into too many of the cases and details covered in *The Invisible War*, the film deals with servicemen and servicewomen who were sexually assaulted in the military. Because of current rules and immediate superiors having the responsibility for initiating the investigation, there was too much of a conflict of interest, and thousands of women and men who fell victim to sexual assault were never able to find justice. Although it was a small step, a sign of the film’s power to bring about change was Leon Panetta crediting the film when he initiated some policy changes. Meanwhile in the U.S., in the aftermath of this film, senators such as Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Kirsten Gillibrand are spearheading efforts to reform the system for investigating sexual assaults in the military. Here is the trailer for *The Invisible War*, as well as clip of Rep. Niki Tsongas (D-MA) at a House hearing discussing the issue of military sexual assault with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Gen. Eric Shinseki.

Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gflcgdfj82Q>.

Rep. Niki Tsongas (D-MA):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDsSvffAuP0>.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Some final thoughts on the significant trends in pop culture and politics and the promise (mostly) and peril for civic engagement and social change. Number one, we should be cognizant of the benefits of the increasing democratization of film. To state the obvious, with streaming services and cable and the Internet, television and film are now more accessible than ever before. And brilliant mainstays of documentary film, like PBS’s phenomenal *Independent Lens* and *P.O.V.* and HBO’s groundbreaking Documentary Films Series, continue to provide access to a wealth of socio-political films. As such, documentaries, foreign films, art house movies, explicitly political films, film shorts, and experimental and satirical works that provoke, educate, and challenge are out there for many of us to consume and

consider. We don't have to go to a big city or a college campus to see political documentaries; they can now come to us. Moreover, maybe the artist has her or his own website and streams the films for free, or you simply go to iTunes, Netflix and the like. So this provides for a greater diversity of topics and thus, the likelihood that we can be exposed to political dynamics at home and abroad that merit our attention and enlightened citizenship. In short, the democratization of film has the real potential, and I think this is already occurring with the few examples I cited, to stimulate discussion and debate over a number of core political dynamics that shape our politics and the world.

As for the heavy lifting of citizenship, film is but the start of the journey. This is sort of the gateway drug: political shows and movies. My colleague Mark Sachleben and I wrote the book *Seeing the Bigger Picture* as a way to expose students and citizens to the utility of pop culture in helping us understand and analyze politics.¹¹ We're not making the case that watching *The Daily Show* or *House of Cards* or *Bully* is the be-all and end-all of your political education and action. In fact, there is political science and social science research that indicates if you only rely on particular sources of entertainment for political news and analysis, this could only exacerbate cynicism, because you don't come to the table with the proper knowledge about political institutions. Thus, rather than informing our participation, it could in fact make you more apathetic, more withdrawn, and more cynical. And obviously, we don't want that. I have a bias in favor of people being engaged, not cynical and apathetic.

So back to the heavy lifting of citizenship: immersing ourselves in vital works from pop culture is but the start of the intellectual and political journey. If you watch *Bully* or *4 Little Girls* or *The Invisible War*, perhaps then you will read more about the reality of bullying in public schools, and perhaps you learn more about what precipitated the events in Birmingham in 1963 and about the epidemic of sexual assault in the U.S. military, and you can do something about it. And be reasonably informed in the process. But it does require the heavy lifting of citizenship: finding the data, doing research, considering alternative perspectives, reading peer-reviewed works, and discussing matters with your friends and perhaps in many cases challenging your own preconceived notions. Politics is complex. We like to boil down major public policy debates to a knee-jerk ideological sound-bite reality, but in most cases, there are many, many layers and dynamics that we need to be aware of in the political sphere. Films, as I've said, can be a wonderful gateway to learning more about these topics and then bringing about social change, but at the same time, we have to understand that we live in a complicated, complex, pluralistic society and the political, economic, and social debates that rage demand our knowledge, our sophistication, and our good faith efforts to solve problems.

NOTES

1. During Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's extensive testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee concerning the September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on January 23, 2013, she stated, in response to a question from Rep. Paul Cook (R-CA): "...if you saw the recent movie *Argo*, you saw the Marines in there, you know, destroying the classified material when the mob was outside in Tehran." See the clip of this statement at <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4330075/clinton-argo>. See also: Tom McCarthy, "Hillary Clinton testifies before House committee on Benghazi – live," <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/23/clinton-testifies-congress-benghazi-live>.
2. The full text of John Kerry's September 6, 2012, speech at the Democratic National Convention: <http://www.nationaljournal.com/conventions-speeches/john-kerry-s-speech-full-text-from-the-democratic-national-convention-20120906>. Regarding the *Rocky IV* (1985) reference, Sen. Kerry said:

But a Romney-Ryan foreign policy would be anything but funny. Every president of both parties for 60 years has worked for nuclear arms control—but not Mitt Romney. Republican secretaries of state from Kissinger to Baker, Powell to Rice, President Bush, and 71 United States senators all supported President Obama's New Start treaty. But not Mitt Romney. He's even blurted out the preposterous notion that Russia is our "number one geopolitical foe." Folks: Sarah Palin said she could see Russia from Alaska; Mitt Romney talks like he's only seen Russia by watching *Rocky IV*.

Moreover, *Rocky IV* is a pop culture reference Kerry continues to employ as a rhetorical shorthand, or stand-in for broader Cold War era geopolitics and perceptions. For example, as secretary of state, Kerry referenced the film when discussing the escalating Ukraine-Russia crisis in 2014 and the imperative for Russia to not view the conflict through the lens of a bygone bipolar era:

Secretary of State John Kerry said Wednesday that Russia should not see the situation in Ukraine as a Cold War conflict, saying it's not a "Rocky" movie. "We're hoping that Russia will not see this as a sort of a continuation of the Cold War, we don't see it that way," Kerry said Wednesday on "Andrea Mitchell Reports" on MSNBC. "We do not believe this should be an East-West, Russia United States — this is not 'Rocky IV.'"

See Tal Kopan, "John Kerry on Ukraine: Not 'Rocky IV',"

<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/02/john-kerry-ukraine-conflict-103988.html>.

3. Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>.
4. Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics*, third edition (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). See also Michael A. Genovese, *Politics and the Cinema: An Introduction to Political Films* (Needham, MA: Ginn Press, 1986).
5. For a Q&A with Water.org's Matt Damon, see <http://water.org/post-v/q-matt-damon/>. For Mark Ruffalo's activist work opposing fracking (hydraulic fracturing) in New York and beyond, see Mark Goodell, "Mark Ruffalo on the Fracking Fight," *Rolling Stone*, May 16, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/blogs/national-affairs/mark-ruffalo-on-the-fracking-fight-20120516>.
6. See Genovese, *Politics and the Cinema*, and Giglio, *Here's Looking at You*.

7. For insight into specific “American tales” and “myths” perpetuated through film—messages that primarily deal with American liberalism (rags to riches, triumph of the West, the immigrant experience, etc.)—see Daniel Franklin, *Politics and Film* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006). See also Mark Sachleben and Kevan M. Yenerall, *Seeing the Bigger Picture: American and International Politics in Film and Popular Culture*, second edition (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).
8. Regarding categories of political film, see Giglio, *Here’s Looking at You*, and Genovese, *Politics and the Cinema*.
9. The segment featured an interview with documentary filmmaker and conservative activist Dennis Michael Lynch, director of the illegal immigration film *They Come to America*.
10. Regarding the plight of 9/11 first responders, specifically their significant and lingering health ailments in the aftermath of the clean-up and the failure of Congress to adequately address their needs and allocate funds (and the polarized, hyper-partisan environment of Congress and Washington, DC, generally) see, especially, *The Daily Show* segments on July 28, 2011, and December 16, 2010, among others: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-july-28-2011/i-thought-we-already-took-care-of-this-s--t>, and <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-december-16-2010/9-11-first-responders-react-to-the-senate-filibuster>.
11. Sachleben and Yenerall, *Seeing the Bigger Picture*.