

Review: "see it now" in lurid black and white

Reviewed Work(s): Good Night, and Good Luck by George Clooney

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# "see it now" in lurid black and white

*gary alan fine*

*Good Night, and Good Luck*, a film by Warner Independent Pictures, directed by George Clooney (2005).

*Good Night, and Good Luck*, the recent film about heroic television journalism in the McCarthy era, is collective memory solidifying before one's eyes. Directed and co-written by George Clooney, the film is all Jell-O and smoke. That it is filmed in black and white is an apt metaphor: the mind-set of the producers is as black and white as their film stock. The plot of the movie is simple, presenting history abstracted from the complexities of current events. The central events of the narrative occur in 1953 and 1954, a period that begins with Senator Joseph McCarthy ascendant and ends with his descent, censured by his Senate colleagues. The film presents the engine of his disgrace as the crusading CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow (played to great effect by David Strathairn; so compelling is Strathairn that we forget he doesn't look much like Murrow). Anyone wondering whether journalists have a political agenda need look no further than this film. Of course, an agenda to some may be old-fashioned civic virtue to others. Whether or not the participants might agree with their depiction, George Clooney, the son of a newscaster, leaves no doubt that journalists have a bias—a cudgel for ethics, as they see it—and should. But can ethics be apolitical? One colleague criticizes Murrow for presenting a single side of the story, yet Clooney's conclusion seems to be that this is a story with a single side.

In several episodes of his programs *Person to Person* and *See It Now*, Murrow uncovers the stain of McCarthy and McCarthyism (the latter term was already in wide circulation among liberals, a result of Herblock's editorial cartoons). The film suggests that Murrow was a major instigator of McCarthy's crack-up, but this account gives more credit to CBS than is strictly warranted. Certainly Murrow provided a public justification for questioning McCarthy's methods. (Murrow in his broadcasts does not dispute McCarthy's

goals of purging government, although personally he apparently had doubts about the goals as well.) Opponents of McCarthy could point to the gravitas of CBS as legitimating their own doubts. However, accounts of media heroism diminish Tail Gunner Joe's self-destructive flame-out. While McCarthy willingly and foolishly bounded into the trap that Boston lawyer Joseph Welch, the lead attorney for United States Army, set for him at the so-called Army-McCarthy hearings, McCarthy's snarling attack on Welch's younger colleague merely provided the opportunity that permitted his supposed allies to pounce.

Despite the film's historiography, it was McCarthy's putative friends who stuck in the knife. Let us not forget that Welch was the lawyer for the army during the hearings. McCarthy's lack of support—and in some cases the closeted enmity of his putative defenders, including President Eisenhower, J. Edgar Hoover, and important Republicans in the Senate—mattered more than smoke-filled newsrooms. By 1954 few were willing to defend the junior senator from

Wisconsin. His supporters had melted away, letting him twist slowly in the wind. McCarthy was a useful pit bull when there was advantage to achieve over the Democrats, but with the GOP ascendant, partisans must mute criticism of their team (the contrast with the Republican caucus in the age of W. is striking: Bush lacks a McCarthy). McCarthy, despite his sins (he was a drunk, bully, liar, and fool), was no hypocrite; he was as willing to gore a Republican administration as a Democratic one, ready to destroy generals as well as economists. Party

meant little to his *idée fixe* of weeding out "Communists" in government. (McCarthy was also no anti-Semite, but this is another story.)

Clooney's decision to film in black and white emphasizes the historical specificity of the events, dramatized as well by the cigarettes drooping from the lips of the characters. In a period piece, filmmakers can transform journalists into heroes, shining a caustic spotlight on today's timid television newsmen. Ever since *Network*, broadcast journalists have been found wanting, cowed by capital, politics, and Capitol politics. In rummaging through the Golden Age of television news, Clooney discovers reporters to be proud of.

To spill the secret: Joe McCarthy is a bad guy, those who hope to turn television into a profit-making industry are misguided, and those who fight against either and both (Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly) are allies of the

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angels. The politics of the film community lines up well with public sociology. Students of the arts will not be surprised that committed journalism, public sociology, social justice, and activism rarely embrace reactionary values.

Joe McCarthy's reputation is tattered beyond rehabilitation, despite the cracked and boisterous efforts of Ann Coulter, but academic memory has frequently erased the Stalinist dangers about which McCarthy's betters warned. As Philip Jenkins has acutely argued, the postwar era could be understood as a Red Menace as easily as a Red Scare: similar monikers with vastly different implications.

By 1953, the threat from the Soviet-enamored left had dissipated. McCarthy's infamous 1950 speech in Wheeling, which established his reputation, was an instance of fighting the last war. The left had been forced from government service during the early years of the Truman presidency. The heavy lifting had been completed by those smarter and tougher, such as Richard Nixon, who inspired the House Un-American Activities Committee to uncover Alger Hiss's perjury.

The discrediting of counter-subversives in postwar Washington is not a unique case. Some naughty behaviors are wiped clean, while others become permanent bruises, blows of a brutal history. As fears mutate, some behaviors are excused, past the statute of limitations.

*Good Night, and Good Luck* also criticizes, hesitantly, the corporate environment of CBS television. William Paley (Frank Langella), the chairman of the board of the Columbia Broadcasting System, is crucial to the story. Paley is an ambiguous good guy, and, as the embodiment of CBS, he directs our attention away from broader institutional structures. On the one hand, Paley stands behind Murrow, letting his star produce his McCarthy moments, and yet he has his sights firmly on the bottom line. Deals are to be made. Murrow—and his producer Fred Friendly (George Clooney)—know that in order to produce their controversial shows they must also interview movie stars and musicians. The pathos of this demand is evident in a clip from an interview with Liberace where Murrow presses the flamboyant entertainer as to whether he plans to settle down with a wife. Lee responds with the dripping irony that our knowledge brings that he might if he could find the "right partner." *O tempora, o mores!*

Eventually Paley shifts Murrow from prime time to the vast wasteland of Sunday afternoon. Even if we appreciate Paley's pressures to maintain shareholder value, the real threat to Murrow's public journalism is from tailored suits, not from yahoo politicians.

The film contains a subplot, resonating with the questioning of Liberace. Two of the news staff are married (Joe Wershba, played by Robert Downey Jr., and Shirley Wershba, played by Patricia Clarkson). However, CBS has anti-nepotism

rules that force their love to be closeted. Eventually they must choose who is to leave. The subtext is apparent: a metaphor for gay marriage in an age in which nepotism stands for the right of institutions to set the terms of romance.

For all its construction of history and reputation, *Good Night* is engaging filmmaking. Even one who questions its simple claims must admire Clooney's panache. We care about these reporters, wish them well, and often transform this factoid into documentary (the documentary footage of McCarthy helps). As a public filmmaker, George Clooney is the Robert Redford of his generation. (Clooney's recent account of oily politics, *Syriana*, deserves its own critique.)

*Good Night, and Good Luck* is a feel-good movie for the chattering classes, a bedtime story. The film reminds us how important collective-memory work can be. In this, it operates on two levels. First, it depicts how newsmen engage in reputation work. They do so proudly and joyously, believing that their perspectives on morality are to be shared. Television news separates wheat from chaff. On a second level the film demonstrates the power of collective memory



in situating the 1950s in the 21st century. The film leaves little space for debate. As Roger Ebert describes the matter, the film is about "professional newsmen who with surgical precision remove a cancer from the body politic." This metaphor—and it is not Ebert's alone—will remind sociologists of C. Wright Mills's demand that we be skeptical of claims of "social pathologists." Mills held no brief for McCarthy, but he would not want history to be built from the atheoretical scraps of newsreaders or those entertainers who recount these doings a half-century later in lurid black and white.

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