

BOB ROBERTS

Directed by Tim Robbins
Produced by Forrest Murray
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1992

A mockumentary in the best muckraking tradition, *Bob Roberts* follows the rise of a (fictional) candidate for the U.S. senate, in 1990. A Pennsylvania man of 35, raised by hippies, Bob Roberts is a multi-millionaire Wall Street maverick and a chart-topping folk singer with a twist: Mr. Roberts is a right-winger, appropriating the populist feel of the 1960s for his own purposes, with songs like "Times Are Changin' Back," "Drugs Stink," and "My Land." We see his campaign through the eyes of an English filmmaking crew, slowly learning that Bob is not the feel-good capitalist his supporters embrace him as. The media goes through the motions of following the Roberts campaign, regurgitating sound bites, press releases and photo-ops, while undertaking no investigations into Mr. Roberts's muddy past. That is left to a hyperactive left-winger, "Bugs" Raplin, a journalist for *Troubled Times*. Becoming a threat to the campaign with his disclosures of S&L failures and Iran-Contra connections, Mr. Raplin is framed for attempted assassination against Bob Roberts. He is released for lack of evidence but killed by one of Bob's fanatical devotees. In the end, Bob Roberts is elected, dignified Senator Brickley Paiste is deposed, and we see that Bob was never really shot at all.

The film is funny, jaundiced, insightful, and slightly paranoid. The best parts are the sections, primarily early in the film, that perfectly convey the communal sense of hope and adventure at work in any campaign operation. Touring Pennsylvania, in a bus called *The Pride*, Bob Roberts stumps, sings, and all the while conducts business.

His campaign workers, who double as traders, advise unseen clients and colleagues on the situation in the Middle East. Just as Senator Brickley Paiste contends, we see that the U.S. war machine is rumbling into action again not to defend freedom, but the bottom line. While the film deals with negative campaigning, the legacy of Vietnam and Watergate, and political campaigns as P.R. machines, *Bob Roberts* is really an indictment of Operation Desert Storm. Just as Bob Roberts wins and Paiste loses, America did lead a coalition to repel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, days after Roberts's swearing-in. To win, Bob Roberts resorted to blatant deception, staging an assassination attempt to appropriate the mantle of martyrdom, and just barely winning even then.

One scene in the movie encapsulates the whole theme. From a Penn State concert, one that was marred by violence when protestors opposed to Roberts were assailed by his supporters, we cut to a close up—a guitar, solitary and silent. The next shot is Bob and Clarissa (she's his duet partner and probable mistress). He's typing methodically on a laptop computer, she is playing the guitar and singing beautifully, some folksy anthem about 'marching on.' (One of her lyrics is 'we're marching for self interest'[!]) Bob looks at the camera malevolently, then, thinking better, turns back with a smile. Three aids sleep, while one carries on with his work, speaking German into a headset. The same watches a television silently playing footage of President Bush and Saddam Hussein. We cut back to Bob, the camera focusing on his

fingers, dancing over the keys. Clarissa seems to love music, but Bob seems to be using it for his own ends. When nobody is there to entertain, he'd rather be conducting business, even late at night. A TV behind her breaks the still and safe repose of the scene, reminding Clarissa (and us) of the harsh forces Bob is unleashing. The footage is from Penn State, the melee on screen a stunning contrast to the quiet of the bus interior. The press reports the disturbance, but focuses the blame on the protesters, not Bob's supporters. Their report ends with unscripted commentary from one of the newscasters, commentary echoing Bob's dismissive rebuff of his detractors ("The '60s are over.") Clarissa resumes singing, and the scene concludes.

The film supports the wrenching changes of the '60s as the product of a newly informed populace defending its rights. When Bob Roberts says the '60s are over, *Bob Roberts* is saying that the time of hope for change has passed. Now it is too late.