

# PRIMARY COLORS

Directed by Mike Nichols  
Produced by Mike Nichols  
Distributed by Universal Pictures  
Released in 1998

For people who think compromise is a dirty word, and that principle should reign supreme, *Primary Colors* is a wake-up call. One of the most incisive films of the 1990s, arguably Mike Nichols's masterpiece, our film details the rise of a Bill Clinton-esque Southern governor destined for the White House. He is an overgrown frat boy, inspiring on the stump and depressing behind the scenes. But he shows promise. Compared to his fellow egotists, a pack of back-stabbing, presumptuous blowhards passing for presidential candidates, Jack Stanton may, indeed, be America's best chance. We follow his ascent courtesy of Henry Burton, a black political consultant who, his race notwithstanding, has led a pretty comfortable life. He's been afforded the opportunity—a grand delusion?—of seeing the struggles of politics as a matter of right vs. wrong. Jack Stanton, whatever his excuses, sees expediency and little else, embracing a modicum of vague principles even in private. And he turns this liability into an asset. In the debate, when Stanton interjects brief compliments regarding his opponents' plans, one frustrated senator demands, "What, if anything, are you against?" Stanton replies: "I'm against doing nothing while people are suffering. I'm against dismissing any idea that might help, because it isn't my idea. Now, Senator, you have met these people, you have looked into their eyes...are you saying that we should do nothing to help unless we come up with it?" Stanton makes a point of telling his audiences hard 'truths,' and characterizes the (decidedly warranted) attacks on his character as groundless. He even has the temerity, speaking to an angry, downsized audience just before the New Hampshire primary, to imply that such attacks help him to understand their struggles (ironically, an association planted by his soon-to-be-disillusioned advisor, Henry). Coupled with his lies about Uncle Charlie to the literacy group in New York City, and his breezy banter with the Schmooze for Jews radio-show host, Stanton would seem to be nothing but a brazen opportunist.

But how does one explain his very natural, empathetic conversation with Danny at the Krispy Kreme when it seems Stanton is finished? He comments to Henry after the young man limps away to the kitchen, "If you let a man like that go down, you don't deserve to take up space on this planet, do you?". There are no cameras. He has nothing to gain by attracting the support of a disabled guy who has neither the intelligence nor the clout to benefit his candidacy in any way. He even eats extra donuts to make the man feel useful.

All Henry can do is hope that Stanton actually cares, that he means it when he says that he must play the game in order to be a leader. (By implication, the people cannot be trusted to make the right decision by merely giving them good ideas and lofty rhetoric. No, you must get down in the dirt and be a huckster in order to win. If you don't win, you can't do anything to help anybody.)

Jack and Henry, plus burned-out-idealist Libby Holden, and Machiavellian wife Susan Stanton, find themselves tested over the long campaign for the nomination.

The film's critical scene finds the four characters locked in a power play in a cluttered kitchen, their choices in that room deciding the direction of the country. Fred Picker, a late entry to the race, has attracted much attention from the electorate, as he is perceived to be competent, humble, and respectable—less tainted than the flashy local-yokel Jack Stanton. Libby and Henry were directed to research why Picker abandoned politics when he had a strong chance at the presidency in the late '70s—only Henry can accept the former governor's explanation that his marriage was in trouble and he needed to look after his kids.

By misdirection and dumb luck, the pair soon discover that Fred Picker was caught up in drugs and gay sex. Libby welcomes this information, for now she can test the character of Jack and Susan Stanton, and see if her loyalty has proved unwarranted. "They graduate, or I do," she vows.

Jack and Susan had encouraged Libby's investigation into Picker's improprieties by musing that if he was using his position to benefit financially then he doesn't deserve to be president. Left unsaid, of course, is that if Picker goes, then Jack is the nominee. Should he abandon the field, too, since he's tainted? Libby reminds Jack of what he said about politics and dirty tricks in his idealistic youth: "Our job is to end all that. Our job is to make it clean. Because if it's clean, we win...because our ideas are better."

Susan and Jack counter with an admonition that they were young, and in their naiveté did not know how the world worked. If Picker is the nominee, then the dirt comes out, and the Republicans win. They must stop that from happening. (So, again,—if only there were some other way!—Jack Stanton's going to have to be president.)

For much of the film, intrigue has swirled around whether Stanton impregnated a poor, black teenager who is the daughter of a friend-restaurateur back home in Mammoth Falls. The thought that his boss may have actually done this, and his subsequent need to tamp down the swirl of gossip by placating the father with talk of a financial settlement, almost drives Henry from the campaign. Libby, now his closest confidant, her job to investigate their own candidate and clean up messes, has determined that the amniocentesis test was flawed since Stanton had another sample of blood substituted for his own. That means that he did have sex with the girl, even if he's not actually the father of her child. If Jack and Susan insist on exposing Picker, then she will expose Jack, and will "destroy this village in order to save it."

Libby will lose, but her ideas will win. She doesn't follow through on her threat, but, instead, totally disillusioned, kills herself. A chastened Stanton then informs Fred Picker that he knows all about his past, giving him a chance to attempt a quiet withdrawal from the campaign.

Henry reproves Jack, since he "flunked" Libby's test. Jack rejoins, "But just now I passed it, so which grade do I get, Henry, the high or the low?" Jack did resist the temptation to "go negative" against Senator Harris. And once he did decide to fight back, it was Harris who ambushed Stanton on the radio talk show while he was enjoying some innocuous blather about Las Vegas. Still, Henry is understandably frustrated. But no matter how far away we get from the corruption, we're still tainted by it (even if he focuses on voter registration they're still going to vote for somebody, and if he doesn't want them to vote for either candidate, then what is he doing wasting his time getting them to register?). And, arguably, if someone doesn't vote at all, that's worse than refusing to care, but then presumptuously giving both sides a piece of your mind. And once the politicians make it to Washington, they discover that the law already on

the books is worse than the compromise-remedy; indeed, it's not unusual that doing nothing at all is worse than doing something not-so-great. Stanton may not be something great, but merely something better. And if that's all we've got to go on, it's hard to say no. Maybe that's why Henry stays. Or maybe it's just really hard to give up on a winner.

When we think back to one of the opening scenes of the film, the conundrum becomes clear. Jack Stanton visits a literacy group to express his support for each member's efforts to swallow his pride and admit he needs help. He tells the story of his Uncle Charlie, who was a WWII hero, but lacked the courage to admit he was illiterate, thus throwing his life away. The class is floored by the caring governor.

But it was all a lie. 'Uncle Charlie' doesn't exist. So what did Stanton do? He encouraged these people to continue on their difficult path, sure. But he did it with a lie. If he hadn't lied, would they have been inspired?

Or were they, really, just inspired to vote for Jack Stanton?

The film's second-to-last line is poignant and a shade pessimistic. President Stanton is admonished by a smiling supporter at the whirlwind inaugural ball: "Now, don't break our hearts."