

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE

Directed by John Frankenheimer
Produced by George Axelrod and John Frankenheimer
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1962

"I think the greatest asset that the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy."

--President Harry Truman

On Thursday, April 19, 1951, General Douglas MacArthur, relieved just days before of his command of United Nations forces in Korea, appears before a Joint Session of Congress. Amidst rolling waves of applause, MacArthur characterizes his disagreements with President Truman in a disarmingly self-effacing manner, blaming Washington interference, rather than his own hubris, for the Korean stalemate. For all the brilliance of his amphibious landing at Inchon, his speech ignores the sad fact that he had breezily dismissed the idea that the Chinese would take the field against United States and Republic of Korea forces. 260,000 Chinese troops proved MacArthur wrong, just as temperatures dropped below zero. He also said, just before the surprise Chinese counterattack, that he hoped to "get the boys home for Christmas." Now 10,000 boys would never see another Christmas. And just when he had declared the situation hopeless in early '51, General Matthew Ridgway rallied the 8th Army and fought back to the 38th Parallel (a turnabout MacArthur had tried to take credit for just a month earlier).

"I address you with neither rancor nor bitterness in the fading twilight of life, with but one purpose in mind: to serve my country." Then later in his speech, challenging the Administration's strict instructions that the conflict was not to be widened beyond the Korean peninsula—to a blockade of the Chinese coast and the destruction of enemy bases north of the Yalu River—he sadly reflects, "In war, indeed, there can be no substitute for victory."

It is a masterful performance. 30 million citizens, mesmerized, watch on television. Work and school have stopped, and Americans are seething. This Korean "police action" had already cost too much in blood and treasure. Why did Korea matter so much? Why didn't Truman focus on the Communist infiltration of the State Department which Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy was brave enough to expose? Maybe Truman *was* a tool of the Communists—he was hiding them in his own government, and he sacked MacArthur before he could finish the job of putting the Soviet Union *and* Red China to bed. One senator admitted later, "I honestly felt that if the speech had gone on much longer there might have been a march on the White House."

Such were the struggles of America in the 1950s. Things had never been better, but optimism was fading. WWII was over, America had won, but now the experts were saying this century would be plagued by a new kind of war, a war that would last for decades, a war of nerves ending in nuclear armageddon.

It was a war that could not be won.

How long could America hold on? The Cold War was turning into something more than an ideological standoff. Things were getting ugly, and the great question was whether an

all-out fight was inevitable, and if so, why not finish it right here, right now...before time ran out for America?

The Red Menace drove children under desks during air-raid drills, spurred the peacetime draft and the Military-Industrial Complex, compelled suburbanites to use up their savings on backyard bomb shelters, and caused the National League's Cincinnati Reds ball club to change its name to the Redlegs. What's so striking about *The Manchurian Candidate* is its ability to channel that all-encompassing dread into something very specific, very pungent. After the film has painted the antagonist power-bloc as all-powerful and monolithic, to then reduce that antagonist to a single person is genius. She's already well established as having another role to play in the narrative, this enemy of the country personified as the personal enemy of the tragic Raymond Shaw. And so a struggle of identity, of supremacy—Communist vs. Capitalist, Atheist vs. Christian—becomes a struggle between mother and son.

The path to that climactic confrontation is harrowing, and bizarre. But many of the surprises do not seem intended by the filmmakers, who bear responsibility for a few self-inflicted wounds.

In the end, Raymond declines to call Ben, knowing that he might be deterred from carrying out his new, self-appointed mission to kill the great hidden threat to American democracy—his own mother. After he's finished shooting he dons the Medal of Honor, an award he had previously treated disdainfully, if not with outright contempt. But now he has finally earned it. What does not make sense is that, moments before the shooting, Raymond aims at the Presidential nominee, Mr. Arthur. Was he wavering? Why would he have the medal with him and why would he tell Ben that he didn't call because of what he had to do, and then take a bead on Arthur? This may be the one cheat about the film. It's curious because all director Frankenheimer had to do was avoid the point-of-view shot of Raymond looking through the scope, sights trained on Arthur. We would have assumed he was lining up his shot against the presidential nominee. It's curious, as is the aftermath of Ben's furniture-smashing bout against Chunjin (one of the first demonstrations of martial arts in a Western picture). Ben knows this guy betrayed their unit with his talk of perilous quicksand, thereby forcing a single-file maneuver that led to their capture; and he remembers that he was present for the brainwashing convention. So why does Raymond keep him on as valet? And why doesn't Ben, during their Christmas Eve revelry, at least mention that he thinks it's a bad idea to keep him employed?

Continuing our survey of the film's many oddities, the score by David Amram is very unusual. It is too repetitive, verges on the atonal, and, while certainly contributing to the general atmosphere of unease, proves merely adequate. Some swirling strings, pounding timpani, and contrapuntal horn blasts as Sinatra hunts for Laurence Harvey at the film's climax would have been more appropriate than the dead silence we get from Amram. The score is defiant, telling us we're not allowed to be entertained—this is a Serious Film.

Finally there's the matter of Rosie. Roger Ebert was convinced that Rosie, too, is an agent, and her cryptic introductory conversation with Ben on the train is her first contact as handler. While her role in the plot is hardly decisive, she does provide a welcome counterpoint to the action, her playful romantic banter lightening the oppressive heaviness of the film. But she is given too much emphasis for the film's good. This may be a result of having snagged

Janet Leigh at the height of her fame, fresh from her iconic role in *Psycho*. Or, to secure her services in the production, her part may have been expanded at the behest of her agent. Or it may have been decided that the film needed more star power to make the film palatable to what would otherwise be a highly skeptical audience. In any event, her character seems out of place.

If Benjamin Marco has not been brainwashed, then why is he reading all the time—weighty tomes representing totally divergent disciplines? Colonel Milt looks at Ben like he truly is crazy. And why does he tell Rosie all about Raymond Shaw's control by a foreign power and how he's resolved to win him back to their side? This is the greatest secret in American intelligence, and here's a decorated Army officer with 19 years experience blabbing to a woman he met on a train just days earlier! And perhaps it's also possible that the reason Ben is reluctant to accept indefinite sick leave is because he will be out of the loop of the Shaw investigation—and it's his responsibility to gather that information to pass on to his American handler (Rosie). To be fair, however, since Ben knows everything, would not Mother Iselin have found out what bed-and-breakfast Raymond was staying at? The only reason Raymond broke off his honeymoon, and got closelined by his mother and a deck of cards, is because he heard his buffoonish step-father threatening his father-in-law with a charge of treason (exactly what Senator Jordan had told Mother Iselin he was intending to do to Senator Iselin).

Iselin is an obvious McCarthy stand-in, but a brief reassessment of McCarthy's role in the Cold War zeitgeist is necessary at this juncture.

McCarthy was accused of lying when at one point he asserted there were 205 Communists in the State Department, while at another time he claimed there were 57. Actually, Secretary of State James Byrnes had admitted years before that 205 identified security risks still had jobs at the State Department. But, as years passed, no one could say what happened to those workers. McCarthy's 57 was from his own investigating, and he did not say who the suspected disloyal parties were because he hoped to protect their reputations in case his information was wrong, preferring to pursue the matter in closed session at the Senate. Democrats demanded he reveal their names publicly or shut up. Only in the 1990s, after the Soviet Union collapsed, did declassified documents confirm that the Russians had spies in high-level positions in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations—Harry Dexter White, Lauchlin Currie, Laurence Duggan, Frank Coe, Solomon Adler, Klaus Fuchs, and Duncan Lee.

McCarthy was not his own worst enemy. He had too many real ones. And in the tumult of the age, while political grandstanding and opportunism were all too evident, party labels were not dispositive. One of McCarthy's toughest foes was Vermont Republican Ralph Flanders, while John and Robert Kennedy supported him to the last.

The politics of the film are very curious. Senator Jordan is a very decent man. We know nothing of what he actually supports, except that he opposes Iselinism and supports the ACLU. The ACLU, especially in the 1950s, was known as a hard-left legal outfit. And Raymond, when he first meets the senator at his country retreat, blurts out that the man is a Communist. Raymond, we learn, is wrong in his judgment about this man...unless we are meant to believe that Jordan *is* a Communist, but for security reasons cannot be made aware of the extent of the Communist conspiracy in America. By this interpretation, when he throws down the gauntlet to Mother Iselin at the costume party, she decides Jordan has to die, because he will inadvertently stop the one great chance for Communism to be supreme in America. Jordan

thinks of Iselin as a dangerous hard-right demagogue, not understanding that he is an agent of the Left, a wolf in sheep's clothing, ready to seize power.

This is an extreme interpretation. But there were Socialists who were not interested in securing power as much as promoting a more fair and just world. Aligning themselves with people who were bent on establishing totalitarianism rather than securing true equality amongst men (as if that were possible), these were the 'useful idiots' who would be discarded when power was secured. Henry Wallace, Vice President from 1941 to 1945, was infamous for advocating a softer course with the Soviet Union. He ran for President in 1948 on the Progressive ticket. Part of his platform called for destroying all nuclear weapons (this at a time when it was believed *only* America had the bomb). He won 2% of the vote.

If Roosevelt had died just four months earlier, history would have been decidedly different.

So the film posits that the paranoia of McCarthyism was not without some justification, but that the Right was wrong to endorse demagoguery rather than a sober review of the evidence of enemy infiltration. Indeed, the deliberate, calm manner in which Whittaker Chambers proved State Department paragon Alger Hiss to be a underground Communist agent gave way to a kind of mass hysteria in the 1950s, where Americans jumped at every shadow while the true danger went unexposed, a development that McCarthy did not start and that extended beyond his death in 1957. Soviet spies continued to vex America and steal her secrets well into the 1980s

The power of the enemy confronting Raymond upon his new life in the city is chilling. He receives a phone call—"Raymond, why don't you pass the time by playing a little Solitaire?" It's like they're watching his every step and can intervene whenever Raymond could save himself (here he's reading the letter about the dream). And then the second call comes a minute later, right when Raymond has turned over the Queen of Diamonds.

This is how it felt. This is why Americans trembled when Nikita Khrushchev thundered, "We will bury you!"

In a way *The Manchurian Candidate* is a story of a sick love triangle between Mother Iselin, Raymond, and Jocelyn. Both women are competing for him, one with a lust for power marked by incestuous overtones (the notorious kiss), and one loving him with no ulterior motive. Jocelyn unwittingly gets the upper hand when she assumes the role of Queen of Diamonds, usurping Mother as Queen surrogate, at the costume party (once Mother Iselin has left the room in the middle of her Solitaire session with Raymond).

So, basically, our story concerns the Communist Bloc against America. The Communist Bloc is represented by Mother Iselin, and America is represented by Raymond Shaw. And just as Raymond Shaw is compromised, his mind not clear, his actions not self-directed, so too was America undermined from within by Communists and other subversives looking to destroy the Republic. We only understand Raymond once we learn about Jocelyn Jordan, and we realize that much of Raymond's studied contempt for mankind is rooted, 1) in the pain he caused Jocelyn before he joined the Army, and 2) his hatred for the mother to whom he is enthralled, who compelled him to sever his ties with Jocelyn quickly and coldly. We would do well to recall Bobby Lembeck's musings during the film's pre-title sequence (an innovative idea

predating the James Bond films). He said to the guys in the unit, upset because Sergeant Shaw was ordering them out of a juke joint, "Well, maybe he's got a girl back home or something." He was more right than he knew. That girl was the reason Shaw was always bitter.

Then the film does something really shocking. It humanizes Mother Iselin. Just as we realize that she is the American handler and we hate her more than ever, we learn that she never wanted this for her son, and she intends to avenge herself on those who brought this pain into his life. She is the true Red Queen, and she intends to rule all. Not only will she be the power behind Iselin in the White House, she will crush her Communist handlers and dominate the East as well as the West.

The greatest battles for our country's future are not waged on battlefields but in offices, laboratories, and back alleys. Much of what we know is wrong, and much that we can never afford to know is horribly true. *The Manchurian Candidate* is one of the most chilling, audacious, and original films to escape from Hollywood. It is chilling because it details how pernicious evil is, how dangerous to the Cold War balance of power an alliance between mutually antagonistic Russia and Red China could be; it is original because it castigates both Left and Right for being caught up in sloganeering and jockeying for power rather than protecting America at all costs; and it is audacious because it refuses to tell a simple story, employing avant-garde techniques that to this day cloak the film in an air of mystery.

The confusion, fear, and endless deceptions documented in *The Manchurian Candidate* are both the creative outpourings of author Richard Condon, and a remarkable distillation of an incredible time where it seemed the progress of history was becoming nothing but a lonely walk down a hall of mirrors leading to impenetrable darkness.