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\*Corresponding author: Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla, Department of Education, Language, Culture and Arts, University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain  
E-mail: [antonio.sanchezescalonilla@urjc.es](mailto:antonio.sanchezescalonilla@urjc.es)

Reviewing editor:  
Lincoln Geraghty, University of Portsmouth, UK

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## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Recovery of the US president character in Hollywood film during Barack Obama's terms

Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla<sup>1\*</sup> and Araceli Rodríguez Mateos<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In the wake of a political, financial, and institutional crisis, Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, and four years later he was appointed for a second term. The media campaign that took him to the White House drew a parallel between the trajectory of the Democratic candidate and the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt for the presidency in 1932, because of the similarities of critical context between two historical moments marked by the need for change and regeneration, both internal and external. Hollywood films have also participated in this political turn, recovering the presidential image after the negative portrait drawn during the Bush–Cheney administration. While Obama has inspired an epic vision of the presidency back on the big screen, the new forged image also offers critical traits based on the public perception of his administration.

**Subjects:** Media Communication; Politics & International Relations; Visual Arts

**Keywords:** US president depiction; film and politics; Washington–Hollywood axis; Franklin D. Roosevelt; Barack Obama

### 1. Introduction

Barack Obama's election as the 44th president of the United States in 2008 is one of the most interesting political phenomena and certainly a landmark in its bicentennial history. For the first time, there was an African-American tenant in the White House to lead the nation. Beyond its symbolic dimension in the struggle for civil rights, this event gained special relevance given the delicate circumstances of this advent. Obama was chosen to become president of the United States in the

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Araceli Rodríguez Mateos are associate professors at University Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid, Spain) and have developed in the past years a research about the depiction of the US president character in fictional films, between 1992 and the current moment. This specific topic is included in a broader R&D project entitled "Imaginaries of the Crisis: Visual Depiction of the Economic, Social and Geopolitical Collapse (1929–2012)." Other results of the research have been published in *LIT Literature Interpretation Theory*, the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* and *Jump Cut*. They hold a PhD in Film Studies and currently are developing a spin-off project about the crisis of the European Dream in film, photography, and visual media.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article tries to explore the close relationship between the US presidency and the film industry in the American conscience, specifically during Barack Obama's terms. The feedback existing between Hollywood and the public opinion responds to a non-stop bidirectional flow that, on the one side, allows image designers to take film archetypes as their references and, on the other side, allows scriptwriters to take from political current affairs all the material they need for their dramas and fictions. A main part of this feedback can be tested in Hollywood blockbusters through leadership, effectiveness, and ethics in the building of presidential characters. In this regard, Obama's terms may have marked a certain change in the depiction of US president fictional characters that can be explored in political and narrative areas, taking into consideration two main factors: a context of crisis and the high-profile image of the Democratic politician.

middle of a political, economic, and institutional crisis, worsened at the end of George W. Bush's second term. Such a situation provided a special meaning, even some sense of transcendence, to the idea of a possible turnaround that controlled Obama's electoral campaign. In fact, his high-profile figure was smartly associated with that of another president chosen in 1932 in similar circumstances, with due respect to the inevitable differences: Franklin D. Roosevelt.

According to the Pew Research Center, 77% of the American citizens considered Obama in 2009 to be a strong leader, at a moment when he had taken the oath of office for the first time. In October 2014, almost in the middle of his second term, these figures had changed: only 47% of the population shared this opinion and Obama's job approval rate had descended to 44% from an initial 64% in January 2009 (Surge of Central American Children, 2014). Finally in August 2016, 53% of the Americans approved Obama's job (Views of Barack Obama, 2016).

From 2009 to 2016, both Obama's phenomenon and his management have been profusely analyzed from different but complementary perspectives, mainly from the political, the economic, and the communicative ones.

For the matter at hand, the filmic area conforms to communication and media. Taking into account Hollywood productions as main references, it proves to be interesting to explore the relationship between Obama's presidency and the popular genres films produced throughout these years, especially regarding leadership, effectiveness and ethics in the building of their presidential characters. This particular approach seems relevant, considering cinema as a reflection of the historical context within films are produced and consumed. Nowadays, in the height of a crisis, it is reasonable to think that cinema has been influenced by media projection, and its social consideration should be taken into account to the extent that public opinion (citizens that are also spectators) remains sensitive to political phenomena.

## 2. Reciprocal connection between presidency and film industry

The aforementioned premise gains strength when observing the mutual influence existing between the presidential figure and his filmic projection. Such a relationship has additionally been reinforced from the sphere of entertainment and politics for many years. Several professionals and researchers point at some interesting ideas on the matter.

Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) for thirty-eight years, draws a parallel between Hollywood and Washington and even wonders what city truly deserves the title of "the entertainment's capital of the world":

I have become convinced that movie people and politicians spring from the same DNA. They are both unpredictable, sometimes glamorous, usually in crisis (imagined or otherwise), addicted to power, anxious to please, always on stage, hooked on applause, enticed by publicity, always reading from scripts written by someone else, constantly taking the public pulse, never really certain, except publicly. (Peretti, 2012, pp. 8–9)

Politics also take on certain codes from the entertainment business when it comes to design strategies for the electoral campaign on a triple basis of narrative, epic, and emotional components: "Americans can also be described as *emotional presidentialists*. Almost all of their political heroes from the past are presidents [...] The public's emotional attachment to the presidency has implications of its own for strong leadership" (Nelson, 2006, p. 14). In Gabler's opinion, the traditional link between US presidency and patriotism has been especially exploited by the Republicans with the aid of the film industry and, since Reagan entered the White House in 1981, "conservatism has become a Hollywood movie, liberalism has become literature" (2004). For this historian, Republicans blindly trust heroes' legitimacy as they humiliate the opposition considering them villains and traitors.

These last reflections may seem to be simplistic at first sight, nevertheless, they are essentially pointing at the close relationship between presidency and the film industry in the American

conscience. The feedback existing between Hollywood and the public opinion is due to a non-stop bidirectional flow that, on the one side, allows image designers to take film archetypes as their references and, on the other side, allows scriptwriters to take from political current affairs all the material they need for their dramas and fictions.

After Bush's two terms, Obama may have marked a certain change in tendency in the aforementioned mutual connection between presidency and the film industry. If so, it would be meaningful to explore trends and influences in political and narrative areas, taking into special consideration two main factors: The aforementioned context of crisis, which allows us to draw a parallel with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the high-profile image of the new president.

When Barack Obama entered the political scene in 2004 with the reading of the Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention, political analysts considered him to have a certain film-like image that showed the complete liberal antithesis of Bush's. The Senator of Illinois did not need any Karl Roves to forge a popular image because his was an autobiographical narrative. Part of the candidate's appeal consisted in an embodiment of the American dream. Hanson and White note in this regard:

Like Roosevelt before him, Obama has had to summon the nation from the sloughs of despair. Accepting Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, Obama sought to cast himself as an exemplar of the American Dream and the best person who could revive and reclaim it for the rest of us. (2011, p. 5)

Along the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama's public image became also an object of interest given his restrained manners, proper to someone who had been a professor of Constitutional Right at the University of Chicago for 12 years. Kellner affirms in this regard:

Unlike the McCain-Palin campaign, he avoided dramatic daily shifts and attention-grabbing stunts to try to present an image of a mature and intelligent leader who is able to rationally deal with crises and respond to attacks in a measured and cool manner, giving him the moniker "No drama, Obama." (2009, p. 729)

### 3. Presidential character and leadership during Bush's terms

In order to understand the cinematographic treatment of the presidential figure during Obama's term, we first need to consider the previous tendencies in the feature films produced between 2001 and 2009, marked largely by 9/11 and its consequences. During Bush's double presidential terms the economic and financial crisis provoked in Wall Street worsened by a second crisis of trust in the presidential figure, as a consequence of the war in Iraq, the unsuccessful reaction to hurricane Katrina, and the exceptional security measures known as the Patriot Act.

Hollywood reflected this institutional crisis through a regression in the epic treatment traditionally granted to the US president character. According to Doherty, toward 1990, the Film industry portrayed the figure of the Commander-in-Chief as a *dramatis persona*, sometimes as a solid member of the tangle and, more often, as the main character of the script (2001, p. 15). This author points also at the presidential figure as an emerging cinema icon, associated to "the sheer imagistic ubiquity of the modern, televisual president," in reference to Bill Clinton. Traditionally, Hollywood had projected an image of the presidential institution as a guarantor of the citizen advocacy in times of crisis. However, 9/11 marked a turning point in the representation of the political and patriotic leader par excellence, relegated to secondary roles till its progressive disappearance from the casting, both in popular genres of action and in dramas with social and political content.

The president's progressive absence from the cinema screens during 2001–2009 was especially notorious in the genres of disaster and apocalyptic cinema. In Kellner's opinion, allegories of disaster and visions of social catastrophe emerged during these years in Hollywood films as a trope evident that articulated worries about environmental, social, political, and economic collapse (2010, p. 81).

Unlike the main tendency of the nineties, filmic plots of disaster or menace after 9/11 included the presidential character detached from any trace of epic nature, and suffered a regression even aggravated during Bush's second term. Such regression remained expressed through four dramatic figures lacking the leadership typically associated to the presidential role by the audience. In the first place, the *coward president*, dealing exclusively with his own political career and capable of abandoning his people during the catastrophe; in the second place, the *president as part of the problem*, an aggravating factor of the threaten against the nation due to his behavior or his decisions; the *president as a victim*, relegated to a secondary role within the drama; and finally the figure of the *absent president* (which stands out during Bush's last years in the Government), specially in films where the mere presence of the president can only be perceived through symbols of power such as the White House or the Air Force One, the army, and National Security Agencies (Rodríguez Mateos & Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2014).

President Bush's Discourse on War against Terrorism did not seem to have any effect at all on cinematographic productions between 2001 and 2009. The president's filmic portrait showed an authoritarian and pragmatic leader lacking any drawing power and sense of state and who was also negligent, untrustworthy, and insensitive. This role was played in various settings of national threat that ranged from the nuclear danger and the ecologic disaster to the local conspiracy and annihilation. This portrait was drawn both in fiction as well as in thrillers with a bigger popular impact: *The Sum of All Fears* (Phil A. Robinson, 2002), *The Day after Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), *The Simpsons* (David Silverman, 2007), *Die Hard* (Len Wiseman, 2007), or *Eagle Eye* (D. J. Caruso, 2008), and also in more representative biopics and dramas such as *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (Samuel J. Bicke, 2004), *Death of a President* (Gabriel Range, 2006), *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard, 2008), or *W.* (Oliver Stone, 2008). On the other hand, films on the war in Iraq showed a critical or negative image of the army and the security agencies, which are organizations that symbolically put forth the stretch of governmental power. This is the case of films like *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007), or *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008).

In November 2008, George W. Bush had gone through a decline in his leadership capacities, reflected on the approval rating to his management, which had dropped significantly from 86% after 9/11 until barely 25% before leaving power (Bush & Public Opinion, 2008). Even though there is no direct relation, there is a coincidental equivalence between the public opinion's assessment and the presidential figure's progressive deterioration in cinematographic productions. Therefore, the image offered by the films made between 2001 and 2008 somehow can be considered a challenge from Hollywood to President Bush's politics, as well as a complaint about the political and social regeneration that society demanded and would later confirm at the polls.

#### 4. Crisis as an opportunity for change

According to financial analysts and historians such as Hendrickson, DiBacco, Kennedy, or Hanson and White, the double economic and institutional crisis faced by the country since 2007 showed similarities to that of 1932, not so much because of the Wall Street and Lehman Brothers collapses but for the need for social regeneration in both historical moments. In this sense, during and after the 2008 electoral campaign, the media spread an image of Barack Obama related to Franklin D. Roosevelt's, whose legacy transcended the economic area and boosted some real progress within civil rights and liberties. Thus, crisis as a challenge was the key aspect that defined an epic side of the Democratic candidate.

In the opinion of historian David Kennedy, both critical moments offered a chance for political reaction and Obama should take note of Roosevelt's lessons, which could be summarized in a single goal: to turn the United States into a safer nation by means of long-lasting reforms (2009). In his article "FDR Lessons for Obama," published in *Time* in 2009, the historian summarized the reaction against crisis through reforms in key areas of the New Deal: universal health care, immigrants' rights, education, and environmental awareness.

Hanson and White evoke the 2008 inauguration speech of Barack Obama as a chance to revive the American dream, in terms equally applicable seven decades before (2011, p. 5). Smith also emphasizes this similitude by pointing at the same speech:

Obama's greatest political challenge is a domestic one, and so it was probably not surprising that the inaugural address of the past on which he drew most inspiration appears to have been Roosevelt's in 1933. The central theme was the same: the nation "calls for action"—a phrase that both men used. Both emphasized that Americans' capacities were undiminished. (2009)

However, the image of the winning candidate could not be compared to Roosevelt's in the strict sense. As Zogby notes, Obama and Roosevelt lived in different nations albeit both presidents were forced to face an economic, social, and political crisis (Zogby, 2008, p. 113). There were also differences of style and charisma. Gabler established an allegoric association between Franklin D. Roosevelt and the homelike proximity in a living room, whereas the metaphor used with Obama was rather a "college lectern," (2010) in the same way noted by Kellner: the nickname "No Drama Obama" seems to point to a low-intensity emotional style clearly distant from Roosevelt's charm in his radio speeches.

Nevertheless, the media highlighted during and after the 2008 campaign an inspiring connection between FDR and Barack Obama, either considering a similar rhetoric and message of hope (Nocera, 2008); or claiming the advent of a "new New Deal" to propel a shift in US governance and politics (Beinart, 2008; Hendrickson, 2012); or even publishing portrayals and montages of Obama resembling Roosevelt's historical pictures, as *Time magazine* (Nocera, 2008) and *New Yorker* did (Packer, 2008).

After Obama's first term, there is room for wondering whether the portrayal of the US president has evolved since 2008 to fulfill the expectations created by the media and spread among the public opinion. The cinema so far, the answer to this question requires an analysis of the presidential role in the political settings shared by Obama and Roosevelt, both economic and institutional, as well as their filmic representation. Thereby, a study of the films produced since 2008 containing the US president as a character could help us to understand to what extent the recent filmic president also resembles the facts, speech, relevance, or charisma attributed to FDR. The two main fields summarizing Roosevelt's legacy, national security in relation to foreign policy, and civil rights along with social reforms within domestic policy, provide the clues to analyze the presidential character in recent films.

### 5. Filmic leader as head of the national security

After Obama's access to the White House in January 2009, two opposite tendencies are noticed in the epic representation of the presidency as national security guarantor: the *absent president* and the *supportive president*. It is easy to recognize them in invasion, disaster, or apocalyptic films, three subgenres studied in previous years and now still at their peak. In productions such as *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), *The Book of Eli* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2010), or *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), people are confronted with destruction or national rebuilding without any presidential reference at all, neither symbolic nor factual. However, the blockbuster *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009) reveals the first positive symptom of recovery through the figure of the *supportive president*.

In *2012*, the role of the African-American president Thomas Wilson (Danny Glover) mimics Barack Obama's close image attempting to fix the mistakes committed by the former administration. Just like President Beck (Morgan Freeman) in *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), Wilson prepares his people for the looming disaster and joins his fate to that of his citizens, to the point of turning the White House into a makeshift hospital. The president, who refuses to leave Washington aboard the Air Force One (unlike President Blake in *The Day After Tomorrow*), insists in always telling the truth to the country. Such attitude contrasts in the story plot with that of the Governor of California, which shows a veiled complaint against public opacity or distortion of those facts related to the Iraq war. The ashes from a volcano rest on Wilson's shoulders and on the refugees, a symbol that Emmerich uses

to remind us of the ashes that rested on the New Yorkers on 9/11. For the first time in over 10 years, Hollywood confronts the audience with a presidential character facing a disaster together with the rest of citizens.

The figure of the *president/victim*, inherited also from the Bush period, is the third cinematic archetype predominating amidst the national security crisis showed by films such as the aforementioned *Eagle Eye* or *The Day After Tomorrow*. This third type appears during Obama's first term in *Salt* (Philip Noyce, 2010), when the presidential character is kidnapped and can only helplessly realize how the country he leads is exposed to nuclear annihilation. As in *Salt*, the *president as a victim's* passivity is also shown in *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). In both cases, it is the main heroic protagonists—a former female spy and a millionaire turned into a superhero, respectively—who solve the crisis and release the president at the very last moment. Such portrait is even surpassed in *Monsters vs Aliens* (Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009), where a hybrid *victim/part of the problem* archetype aggravates the threat of hostile aliens invading the Earth.

## 6. The White House under Siege

Finally, during Obama's second term, two thrillers are released in action plots turning the White House into the object of a terrorist attack, with the subsequent threat against the president and the outburst of a governmental and military crisis. *Olympus Has Fallen* (Antoine Fuqua, 2013) and *White House Down* (Roland Emmerich, 2013) show similar plots and dramatic elements: paramilitary conspiracy involving American politicians, security officials, and international agents; assault on the presidential mansion in order to kidnap the leader; danger of thermonuclear World War including the annihilation of the national territory; and infiltration of a spontaneous leader in the theatre of operations: an expert in security who puts an end to the international crisis, releases the US president and restores democracy. Both films give a step toward the restoration of the epic image of the presidential figure, providing it with a greater role in the plot. In *Olympus Has Fallen*, the presidential character remains kidnapped for most part of the plot, whereas the burden of action essentially falls on an ex-security agent, played by Gerard Butler, as well as on the Speaker of the House, Trumbull, played by Morgan Freeman. The veteran actor, who had already incarnated a *supportive* presidential role in *Deep Impact*, takes charge of the supreme national authority, as provided in the constitution in case of incapacity of president and vice-president, the last one also kidnapped. Trumbull turns therefore into a new African-American president, endowed with the moral prestige that the actor himself is able to contribute due to his previous interpretations. President Asher, on the other hand, is relegated to the role of *president/victim* in spite of his resistance against pleasing the terrorists' intentions.

*White House Down*, Roland Emmerich's fourth production including a presidential character, shows an even more audacious approach to the American leader. To start with, President Sawyer shares the terrain with the candidate to security agent John Cale and helps him in his plan to neutralize a terrorist attack on the US Capitol and the White House. At the beginning of the film, the president had presented a global peace plan and his disagreement with the Speaker of the House, one of the main conspirators, appears evident. When it comes to building Sawyer's presidential figure, Emmerich takes inspiration from Obama himself: Jamie Foxx, African-American like the 44th president of the United States, acts in the opening scenes according to the standards of restrained university professor and family man. However, his collaboration with Cale causes an evolution of the presidential character, then capable of wielding a machine gun and facing the terrorists who have demolished the Capitol dome and knocked down the Air Force One.

Whereas they partly recompose the battered image of the American president character, it is significant that both films seem to vindicate an attitude of greater forcefulness on his behalf in matters of national security. As it is depicted in these plots, the Commander-in-Chief does not show the necessary self-sufficiency to accomplish the protection of a nation under attack. Asher and Sawyer are well-intentioned, supporting leaders whose aim is to defend the common good, but both need the complement of a hero from outside the institution in order to guarantee peace, at home and abroad.

This portrayal of the president in matters of national security coincides with DiBacco's opinion on Obama's international strategy, attenuated after the disastrous consequences of the Iraq war. This expert in geostrategic establishes a comparison between the current president and Roosevelt's politics of 1937, four years before an inevitable war against the Axis:

Both men could be clearly called procrastinators at least or negligent at worst in terms of foreign policy crises. To be sure, Roosevelt's reluctance to do more in the European theater after Hitler's rise to power and subsequent aggression could be attributed to the overwhelming attitude of the American people not to be involved in any intervention in Europe after the debacle of World War I. (DiBacco, 2013)

In comparison to the preceding period 2001–2009, the US president character reappears as a *dramatis persona* in mainstream film scripts produced between 2009 and 2013. Nevertheless, this image does not reach the high-level leadership reached during the nineties, when archetypes like *president/soldier* or *supportive president* were spread (*Thirteen Days*, *Independence Day*, *Air Force One*, *Deep Impact*). Both archetypes express categories of leadership noted by experts in presidential image. Thus, Grossman and Kumar associate leadership with the capacity to take military decisions, commanding experience, intellectual efficacy, and foreign recognition (Nelson, 2006, pp. 1–27). In Barber's opinion, both the charismatic style and some geopolitical vision stand out as fundamental leadership skills (1985, pp. 5–6). Finally, Greenstein points out the features of the public communicator, namely organizational capacity and political skill, vision and emotional intelligence (2000, pp. 3–14).

Considering the aforementioned categories, the image of the presidential character spread by Hollywood between 2009 and 2013 does not meet the expectations of an international leader in matters of national security. Despite regaining the dramatic status as a leader, the US president in *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down* requires on the other hand the supporting role of another co-protagonist: a classical action hero able to balance the president's shortages (lack of military leadership, incapacity of preventing conspiracies, inability to consolidate a reliable team), while promoting his prominent skills (political efficacy, popular charisma, and intellectual efficacy).

With respect to films on the reconstruction of historical facts, it is significant the symbolic relevance of the presidential character in two titles of 2012: *Argo* (Ben Affleck) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow). In the first one, the presence of Jimmy Carter (one of the least represented presidents in Hollywood) is reduced to the approval and monitoring of the unusual plan, proposed by the CIA in 1980, to evacuate a group of civil servants from the US Embassy in Tehran. In the second film, Obama's management appears associated to the elimination of CIA's main objective after 9/11. As in *Argo*, the president intervenes positively in issues associated with national security, even though in Bigelow's film the presidential role receives an ambiguous moral judgment.

### **7. Institutional regeneration and social progress. *The Butler***

In the area of domestic policy, *The Butler* (Lee Daniels, 2013) stands out as the film that may best show the so-called Obama's "autobiographical narrative." Released nine months after his second victory, the story was based on Eugene Allen's life, butler between 1952 and 1986 throughout eight presidential terms, the script summarizes the history of the civil rights movement in two dramatic scenarios: the White House, where the African-American Cecil Gaines serves several presidents as a silent witness of their dilemmas about racial equality, and the house of Gaines himself, where the butler experiments a conflict with his son, a civil rights activist.

The protagonist begins to work at the president's House on the day Eisenhower suggests sending federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, in an effort to stop racial segregation in public schools. From that day on, Cecil always complies with his boss's warnings: "The room should feel empty when you're in it," and "We have no tolerance for politics at the White House." Therefore, for 30 years, he will be a silent witness to the discussions between Lyndon B. Johnson on civil rights, to Ronald Reagan's arguments against the veto of the sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime. Cecil's

apathy contrasts with Louis's struggle. By means of a dramatic device that reminds of *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), the young man lives historical moments such as the Freedom March, the Black Panthers Revolution, or Martin Luther King's assassination. After the reconciliation between father and son, the plot ends with a symbolic moment: the reception of Cecil at the White House by the first African-American president.

*The Butler* offers a gallery of six presidential portraits: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Obama. JFK's epic depiction stands out as an example of *supportive president* who fights for the civil rights, this being reinforced by specific moments: some of them fictitious, such as that in which Gaines reads a story to Caroline Kennedy, or historical such as the scene when Jacqueline gives him a tie of her dead husband as a gift. Johnson and Reagan feature an image of certain ambiguity, for the film combines LBJ's efforts for civil rights with his racist jokes, or Reagan's human treatment and generosity with his refusal to the sanctions on South Africa. Of all the presidents, Nixon displays the darkest portrait: like all previous films on this Republican president, *The Butler* notes the Watergate scandal as the highlight of his tenure, and the film also underlines his introverted, opportunist, and rigid character. Nevertheless, the script fails to associate Nixon with the archetype of *president as part of the problem*.

The presidential characters' credibility seems arguable, taking into account the film's aim at synthesizing a history of civil rights between 1957 and 2008. However, the double historical and allegorical language used at both houses respectively (the White House and Cecil Gaines' house) may increase this confusion of narrative levels and diminish the verisimilitude of the script, as American critics observed—Turan especially among them (2013)—, even though most of them excused this shortage with the social relevance of the plot.

Obama cannot be considered exactly as a character. Despite starring the climax with his victory and the story ending with him welcoming Gaines to the White House, a fictitious event, the president exclusively appears in archive footage on TV. In himself, the character is treated as a historical icon, and his dramatic content only refers to the biographical, marked by the electoral victory as a culmination of the civil rights. The fact of avoiding the president's performance shows a reverential respect for the leader, depicted more as a symbol of support for those who dream than a *supportive president*.

*The Butler's* greatest value maybe consists in placing the presidential characters in the axis of a difficult though unstoppable process in the social realm. Undoubtedly, this approach to the revision of American recent history acquires full meaning during Obama's terms, not only because his political victory means a milestone in that struggle: it also reinforces the presidency's image, linked to an internal advancement with no turning back, even though the argument becomes especially critical with some of the presidents (especially Nixon). Yet it would be difficult to imagine such a filmic bet during Bush's period.

## **8. Two liberal responses from Hollywood: *The Conspirator* and *The Ides of March***

*The Conspirator* (Robert Redford, 2010) and *The Ides of March* (George Clooney, 2011), two feature films made by actor-directors well known in Hollywood for their support of liberal causes, adopted a more critical position against the presidential character. During Bush's last term, Redford had joined a tendency against the War on Terror (*Lions for Lambs*, 2007). For his part, Clooney described in *Good night, and Good Luck* (2005) the CBS's struggle against Senator McCarthy and his un-American activities investigations in times of the cold war. The evocation of this challenge supported the reply given by the media against the special security measures of the time, foreseen by the Patriot Act after 9/11.

*The Conspirator* recreated the military trial against those accused of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and attempted to do the same against the vice-president and the Secretary of State. The plot revolved around Mary Surratt, the only female defendant, who owned the guest house where John Wilkes Booth and his henchmen planned the attacks. Frederick Aiken, attorney and ex-combatant

awarded by the Union, is appointed Surratt's defender in an after-war environment of patriotic restlessness, national mourning, and outrage against the Southerners' cause. Aiken then goes to confirm the possibility of Surratt's innocence and, convinced of his defendant's right to a fair trial, condemned the tribunal's way and the presentation of false witnesses. At the same time, he claims for the cause to be judged by a popular jury. Surratt could be absolved if she reveals her son's whereabouts, who had been accused of taking part in the conspiracy; however, when confronting her negative to give her son away, the attorney understands the loss of the case.

The film was released in England in the Spring of 2011, the same week when Barack Obama publicly announced that, against his initial opinion, Khalid Mohammed and other four people accused of terrorist crimes would be judged by a military tribunal, and not by a New York court. Such coincidence is relevant, for *The Conspirator* reached the screens as a complaint against one of Obama's most widely spread electoral promises: the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison. The script depicts a *president/victim* whose murder symbolizes a nationwide attack, and it is according to such dramatic base that a reflection is placed upon those civil liberties damaged by special security measures, especially against the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. The continuity of a prison for "unlawful enemy combatants" in a status of indefinite incommunicado military custody was one of the main evidences.

Redford refers this way to the allegories between Mary Surratt and those kept in the military base: "The parallels are there, they're obvious, but it's not for me to point them out [...] How can you not see Guantanamo, how can you not see the Patriot Act, how can you not see habeas corpus being threatened?" (Ebert, 2011). According to the director, the case of Mary Surratt meant the cancellation of the constitution as well as individual rights, by virtue of the reason of State. Prior to her execution, the attorney hears the words "Inter arma silent leges" [For among times of war, the laws fall silent] as an excuse before the injustice that everyone implicitly acknowledges. Beyond the breach of an electoral promise, the director reflects in the film disappointment and skepticism toward the real possibilities of a social regeneration during the Obama Era.

Part of this sense of disappointment can also be outlined in *The Ides of March*. The film tells the story of Stephen Meyers, second communication manager of Mike Morris, the Democratic Governor of Ohio who runs to the presidential primaries and seems to be a clear presidential candidate. Stephen, young and idealistic, suffers some disenchantment when he discovers his leader's real moral background, for he is involved in a sexual scandal that pushes a young female intern to commit suicide.

As Mike Nichols had already done in *Primary Colors* (1997), *The Ides of March* reflects ethical dilemmas regarding honesty, political career, and victory whatever the cost. However, Clooney overtakes in its strength Nichol's electoral fable about the Clintons. There is an obvious comparison between Morris and Obama, not only in the candidates' speech, style, and charisma but also in the similarity between both their election posters and their motto: "Believe," a clear reminder to Obama's "Hope." At a given time, *The New York Times* reporter played by Marisa Tomei assures Stephen that "candidate Morris, with his hope-and-change rhetoric, could turn out to be anything but a disappointment." In this respect, Gleiberman suggests this a "liberal Clooney's comment on the disenchantment so many Obama supporters feel about the president they once thought of as a savior" (2012).

Other analysts have observed in Morris a melting-pot of American politicians like John Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Democrat Senator John Edwards, and Obama himself, with the aim of inspiring a mixture of "charisma, compromises, and weaknesses" (Vancheri, 2011). It proves significant the fact that both George Clooney and Grant Heslov, scriptwriter of *The Ides of March*, decided to postpone the production, based on the novel by Beau Willimon, *Farragut North*, for Obama had

just won the elections in 2008. “Wait a minute. We can’t make this movie [explained Clooney in an interview]. Everybody is too happy. Everybody feels too good. This movie is too cynical” (Horn, 2011). Two years later, once the debate around a universal health care system had started and “the midterm elections polarized government and the nation once again,” (Horn, 2011) they thought it was their chance to show their film to the American public opinion. Looking at it retrospectively, the script’s references to President Obama and his association with the negative treatment of candidate Morris are a powerful message of the ethics and purity, launched on the White House by one of the most renowned liberal voices in Hollywood and well-known supporter of the Democratic Party.

### 9. *Lincoln*, Spielberg as lecturer on presidency

The epic depiction of the US presidency in *The Butler* contrasts with the allegoric criticism shed on *The Conspirator* and *The Ides of March* regarding certain aspects of the presidential management, especially those associated with the political and ethical regeneration that augured a new New Deal in the Obama Era. Yet *The Butler*’s impact on the public opinion turned up to be greater than the one exerted by both films together (116,6 million dollars raised in the US between the release date and July 2014, facing 40,9 million raised by *The Ides of March* and 11,5 million by *The Conspirator*). However, *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg, 2012) was undoubtedly the best welcomed film on a presidential character (182,2 million between the release date and July 2014).

Based on *Team of Rivals*, a biography by Doris Godwin, Tony Kushner’s script on Lincoln narrated the four-month-long legal battle, full of deals and pressure, to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which the president wanted to obtain before the imminent end of the Civil War in order to decree the abolition of slavery in America. To conceive his depiction of Abraham Lincoln, Spielberg explained:

We didn’t want to put Lincoln on a marble pedestal. Also we weren’t going to any great lengths to explore every aspect of him, because most of that is unknown, especially his depths. But we did want him interacting with the big issue at hand, which was fighting to enough votes to pass a constitutional amendment. (Lawrence, 2013)

Spielberg’s portrait of this fighting president (half *soldier*, half *supportive*) meets the six traits of presidential leadership counted by Greenstein in *The Presidential Difference*, namely: public communicator, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, cognitive style and emotional intelligence (Greenstein, 2000, pp. 3–14). Without them, the Republican politician would not have been able to obtain the necessary support to win one of the toughest and most transcendental voting of the House. Moreover, according to the classification of presidential temperament proposed by Choiniere and Keirse, Abraham Lincoln meets a rational profile typical of engineers and organizers (Choiniere & Keirse, 1992, pp. 475–490). Daniel Day-Lewis’s interpretation reveals this last tendency, offset by an affable and unbiased style, both in Lincoln’s discussions with the members of his own cabinet as well as in the conversations he had with other fellow politicians of the same or opposite political affiliation.

In Kellner’s opinion, the ability for conversation skills and political relations highlighted by Spielberg in *Lincoln* constitute a real lesson for the president since 2008:

The message for Obama is that flights of oratory and rhetoric are great, but you have to be fully engaged with Congress, including getting your hands dirty, to produce results. And another message for Obama is that to get progressive results you need to reach out to radicals, as Lincoln reached out to fierce anti-abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones) to get the Thirteenth Amendment passed. (Kellner, 2013)

According to this researcher, Lincoln's political setting matches contemporary American scene, with an equally divided country paralyzed by partisan bickering and with a system where deals and corruption prove essential for the passing of laws. According to George Stevens, Lincoln's rival and fellow party member, "the greatest measure of the 19th century was passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America" (Guelzo, 2002, p. 401).

## 10. Conclusions

Hollywood's film industry reacts to Barack Obama's arrival at the White House in 2008 with a change in the depiction of presidential characters. During Bush's administration, the US president was usually shown in the big screen as a politician deprived of leadership, both in popular action films and in political/social dramas. Along with this, feature films reflected the presidency's progressive smear and its decrease in popular approval rates. Thus, this involution was expressed through four main dramatic figures: the *coward president*, the *president as part of the problem*, the *president as a victim*, and the *absent president*.

In the Obama Era, the film industry has continued expressing traits of the social and political context by reinforcing the presidential figure in line with the president's charisma and his advantageous public consideration, especially during his first term. The inherited crisis favored a media campaign with the depiction of Obama as an icon of historical change, and cinema took advantage of this boost to return to an epic approach of the presidential figure. This new dimension can be observed in the nuanced plots related to national security, where the character gains prominence and flair for leadership, and also in others related to progresses in the area of domestic politics, especially connected to civil rights and liberties. Thus, the presidential portrait appears linked to an institutional and political regeneration, according with the aims of the White House. Nevertheless, it proves significant the fact that such portrait did not meet the expectations of an international leader, as it had been set by the film industry in the nineties during Bill Clinton's double term.

In this epic restoration of the presidential character, the cinema has also reflected a social disenchantment regarding Obama's management and a critical tone can be appreciated in certain films dealing with the working of the political and judicial system. The suppression of rights in Guantanamo is allegorically referred to, at the same time that cynicism and corruption around the political elite (even around the most committed leaders with serving the people) are boldly questioned.

Abraham Lincoln is put forward in the big screen as a presidency's historical referent of the current time. He undoubtedly is a positive political icon, one of the most valued leaders among Americans, as was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a cinematic referent of the presidency during the nineties. However, the fact that the film industry did not propose Franklin Delano Roosevelt proves symptomatic, provided that Obama's campaign for presidency highlighted the parallelism existing between both leaders, who came up from critical contexts and had aspirations for change. It is therefore obvious that this political and media analysis didn't have any repercussion, except for the double need of domestic and foreign regeneration. Moreover, cinema resorts Lincoln as the most suitable icon to teach a lesson of political skill precisely when Obama's leadership was being questioned by his difficulty in having his electoral compromises done.

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### Author details

Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [antonio.sanchezescalonilla@urjc.es](mailto:antonio.sanchezescalonilla@urjc.es)  
ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3263-0547>  
Araceli Rodríguez Mateos<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [araceli.mateos@urjc.es](mailto:araceli.mateos@urjc.es)

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Language, Culture and Arts, University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain.

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