

## *Original Paper*

# The Impact of Hollywood Political Films on US Politics and Politics Culture: A Case Study of Thirteen Days

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### **Abstract**

*This essay uses the Hollywood political film Thirteen Days as a case study, by combining the authentic historical and political background of the 1960s Cuban Missile Crisis in the United States, examines the roles and impacts of Hollywood political films in shaping U.S. politics and political culture. Specifically, by reconstructing historical decision-making processes, portraying an idealised presidential image, and conveying ideological information, Thirteen Days has contributed to enhancing public understanding of politics, strengthening the political beliefs, and fostering social unity and cohesion to some extent. However, it may also promote information bias by selective storytelling and perpetuating the manipulation of ideology by dominant political interests. In addition, this essay also discusses Thirteen Days's global cultural impact as a vehicle for exporting American values and reshaping Cold War memory.*

### **Keywords**

*Hollywood Political Films, U.S. Politics, U.S. Political Culture, Media and Politics, Ideology and Film*

### **Introduction**

Hollywood has great influence in the world as one of the most famous centres of the global film industry. Among the various genres of films produced in Hollywood, political films have played active roles in shaping US politics and political culture. In this context, the film *Thirteen Days* featuring the narrative of the Cuban Missile Crisis serves as a compelling case study, offering insights into the intersection of film, history, and politics in the US context. This essay uses the film *Thirteen Days* as a case study to examine the role and impact of Hollywood political films on the shaping of US politics and political culture. It will begin with the era and political context of the *Thirteen Days* film's theme, provide an overview of the film, launch into an analysis of the roles that *Thirteen Days* has played in shaping US politics and political culture, analyse the positive and negative impacts in relation to each of these roles, and then conclude with a discussion of *Thirteen Days*' cultural impact on the US and globally.

### **The Era and Political Context of *Thirteen Days***

To begin with, it is necessary to understand the era and true political context of the *Thirteen Days* film. After the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union embarked on a tense political, economic and military confrontation, and both sides engaged in fierce political and military competition on a global scale, including the arms race for nuclear weapons, espionage and proxy wars. In 1962, the Soviet Union chose to deploy missiles in Cuba to prevent the United States from taking advantage of missiles in other political contests, and also in response to the deployment of United States intermediate-range missiles in Turkey (Garthoff, 1992, pp. 41-53). Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev hoped that this move would strengthen the Soviet Union's strategic position in the Cold War and put direct military pressure on the United States.

On 14 October 1962, United States U-2 reconnaissance aircraft photographed the Soviet Union's construction of missile launching bases in Cuba, which were capable of directly striking against many major cities on the United States mainland. After convening and deliberating with the special Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), United States President John F. Kennedy announced to the public in a nationally televised address on 22 October that the United States would impose an embargo on Cuba, searching for any Soviet or Eastern Bloc vessels attempting to enter the region and banning the entry of any material used to support missile deployment (Dobbs, 2008).

On 26 October, the United States launched an Atlas intercontinental ballistic missile across the Pacific Ocean from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, and on 27 October a Soviet missile shot down a United States U-2 reconnaissance aircraft flying over Cuba (Jenkins, 2021). On the evening of the 27th, Kennedy proposed to Khrushchev that the United States guarantee it would not invade Cuba in exchange for the Soviet Union's withdrawal of its missiles, and on the 28th, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy's terms and replied publicly through Moscow radio and diplomatic channels to ensure that an agreement would be reached and peace achieved (Garthoff, 1992, p. 48).

### **Overview of *Thirteen Days***

*Thirteen Days* is an American political thriller film produced by Hollywood and screened in 2000, using the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the US-Soviet Cold War as its main plot. It is important to note that the film is built on completely authentic history, with all plot points corresponding to real historical timelines from the previous section of the narrative. To ensure authenticity and authority, the screenwriters used a large number of actual recordings of ExComm meetings during the Cuban Missile Crisis (White, 2011, 130-50). As it is a real historical event and the audience already knows the result, the point of the film is not to highlight the US response strategies, but to accentuate how the US government negotiates and decides on those response strategies.

The story starts with photographs taken by American reconnaissance planes of the Soviet Union's clandestine deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the United States Government realises that if these missiles are put into operation, they will pose a direct threat to the national security of the United

States. The film details the tense discussions and decision-making process within the US government from the perspective of Special Assistant to the President Kenneth O'Donnell, and repeatedly demonstrates the disagreements and controversies between members of the US military and cabinet over the approach to the crisis. During deliberations by the highest authorities of the United States Government, the leaders of the three branches of the armed forces, led by the Air Force, strongly favoured United States air strikes to destroy the missiles deployed by the Soviet Union in Cuba, while Kennedy insisted on trying to settle the issue by agreement, avoiding a nuclear war and striving for peace. In the end, Kennedy reaches an agreement with Soviet leader Khrushchev through diplomacy: the Soviet Union agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba, while the United States promised not to invade Cuba and secretly removed the American missiles deployed in Turkey. The film then ends with the achievement of peace and a win-win situation for both the United States and the Soviet Union.

## **The Roles of Thirteen Days in Shaping US Politics and Political Culture**

### **1. Restore the Real Historical Events & Reproduce the Government's Decision-making Process**

The first role of the film in shaping politics is that as an art form that combines visual and aural techniques, the film is able to use dramatic representation to restore and recreate historical footage, which gives the audiences the opportunity to understand and become closer to the government's political decision-making process. To be more specific, the producers of *Thirteen Days* detail the inside stories of the Cuban Missile Crisis in a near-documentary format (Scott, 2011). The film makes use of key historical sources and real dialogue clips from ExComm, based on this, it incorporates original news footage (White, 2011, p. 136). The film embodies a sense of balance between historical authenticity and dramatisation in this way, visualising politics to the audience in a more vivid way.

In addition, as mentioned previously the plot of the film *Thirteen Days* focuses on the decision-making process of the Kennedy administration, with the audiences participating in the crisis from the perspective of President O'Donnell's special assistant. Highlighting O'Donnell's character is a narrative device that the film uses to force the Kennedy brothers to reveal their thoughts to a third party in order to expose their ideas (White, 2011, p. 140). Meanwhile, through this way the audiences are also able to enter this crisis decision-making process with a relatively objective perspective, thus giving their own judgement.

### **2. Portrayal of the President's Image**

The second role that *Thirteen Days* played in shaping US politics is to recreate and nostalgically portray an idealised image of the president through the film. By depicting the presidential character behind the scenes, away from the camera, films provide citizens with an intimate and personal image that is not available to the news media or historical accounts, which helps to construct a specific presidential image (Uscinski, 2010). In addition, the 1990s were a period of great anxiety in US politics as both US and international politics were in a state of constant flux and instability (Frame, 2012). In a period as such, the public needed to be shown an image of the president that is idealised and in accordance with mainstream perceptions, and portraying the character through the film is one method for this. The

*Thirteen Days* portrays Kennedy as a man of high morals who is both prepared to confront the Soviet Union and has the preservation of peace to protect his citizens as a primary consideration (White, 2011, p. 141). The ideal presidential image must exude traditional and masculine power, declaring one's will to the nation and the world, while approaching the expectations of the traditional father image as a nurturing and reassuring presence (Frame, 2012, p. 321). The portrayal of Kennedy in *Thirteen Days* matches this expectation almost perfectly, and this image-making relates directly to US political culture.

### **3. Influencing Political Perceptions Through Ideology**

The third role of the *Thirteen Days* in shaping the political culture of the United States is its ability to convey political ideas through ideological messages. This ideology can be divided in terms of its manifestations into surface ideological symbols and underlying ideological frameworks. Firstly, the *Thirteen Days* heavily contains footage of the White House, the American flag and the Pentagon. Hollywood connects the ideological symbols represented in these scenes to US politics to tell the story of US democratic legacy (Scott, 2011, p. 7). Secondly, the underlying ideological framework embodies a type of influence on US political perceptions and political culture through subconscious politics. The core of US political ideas is an ideological framework built around individualism, which is the driving force behind freedom and equality (Scott, 2011, p. 20). This ideological framework is reflected in the *Thirteen Days* in the portrayal of the US leader with personal heroism. In shaping US political culture, subliminal politics is both an important part of the way Hollywood works and the operation of US political values.

## **Positive Influences on the Role of the *Thirteen Days* in Shaping American Politics and Political Culture**

### **1. Enhancing Public Political Understanding and Participation**

The positive impact of the role of restoring real historical events and reproducing the government's decision-making process is the ability to enhance audience understanding of politics and promote political participation among US citizens to some extent. The narratives contained in popular films and videos about politics may have a very strong influence on how people understand politics, develop attitudes and express opinions (Zoonen, 2007, 531-47). According to the previous discussion, there is no doubt that the content of *Thirteen Days*, which is based on authentic historical material, enhances the viewer's understanding of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it encourages the audience to participate in the decision-making of the Kennedy administration through the screen with a third-party and objective viewpoint. Moreover, the film portrays and witnesses political dilemmas, and when entering into a dialogue on it, the audience is able to consider their own interpretations more critically (Giroux, 2001, 583-98). This also demonstrates the positive impact of the *Thirteen days* in strengthening the political understanding of the audience.

In addition, this positive impact may further promote US citizens' political participation and global public dialogue. Some sequences in the film exemplify the impact of national politics on small families, for

example, O'Donnell visits his son's school with sadness and concern when he believes that war is an inevitable result, and repeatedly instructs his wife on how to get into a bomb shelter and take refuge in the first place. This plot arrangement reflects the fact that national politics is relevant to every citizen and encourages citizens' belief in political participation. For global audiences, films constitute an invitation to shape public memory and hope, and in this way to engage in a wider public dialogue (Giroux, 2001, 588).

## **2. Strengthening the Political Beliefs**

The *Thirteen Days* film's portrayal of President Kennedy is in line with citizens' expectations of the image of the president, which has a positive effect on strengthening the political beliefs of US citizens. The nature of democracy puts special pressures on presidents, for the public, presidents are expected to appear strong and capable of taking the fight to the enemy (Chapman, 2024). In *Thirteen Days*, Kennedy is portrayed exactly as the public expects a president to be, the lonely victor against everyone by himself, confronting the commander in chief of the army who encourages war, confronting the leader of the Soviet Union, and ultimately prevailing to resolve the threat of the enemy. The film had a significant impact on the concept of presidential leadership, fixing the image of leaders and outstanding leadership in the minds of audiences (Chapman, 2024). In addition, Kennedy represents an important moment in which US democracy is being severely tested and reassessed (Scott, 2011, p. 20). The publication of this film, which idealised the image of the president during the politically unstable period of the United States in the early 21st century, increased the level of trust and dependence of US citizens on the US government and the leader, and strengthened the political beliefs of US public to a certain extent.

## **3. Promoting Social Solidarity and Cohesion**

The positive impact of the role that *Thirteen Days* plays in influencing the political perceptions of US society through ideology is its ability to promote social unity and cohesion in the United States. Both the ideological symbols embodied in the film's obvious American flag and White House and the underlying ideological framing of the US government with its heroism emphasise a sense of patriotism and nationalism. Media discourse, combined with empirical knowledge and public wisdom, can have a very strong influence on the formation of attitudes and opinions (Zoonen, 2007, p. 532). This influence has been crystallised in the *Thirteen Days* by strengthening the national identity of US citizens, thereby fostering social unity and cohesion.

## **Negative Influences on the Role of the Thirteen Days in Shaping American Politics and Political Culture**

### **1. Selective Presentation Leads to Information Bias**

The previously mentioned role of *Thirteen Days* in shaping US politics of the first restorative historical event and the second in portraying the president's image have the same potential negative effect, which is that the film's selective presentation of information may lead to cognitive bias of the audiences.

Firstly, some films may have fabricated false histories, although *Thirteen Days* draws on authentic

historical materials and recordings of the Cuban Missile Crisis and follows all the real timelines, there is a certain degree of selectivity in its presentation. It hides part of the historical facts, which may lead to biased information for the audience and negatively affect the public's understanding of this historical event and politics. In terms of the true causes of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy's public statement in the spring of 1962 that the United States could theoretically launch a first nuclear strike against the Soviet Union was the root cause of Khrushchev's concern and the reason why he felt it necessary to deploy missiles in Cuba (White, 2011, p. 139). While in *Thirteen days*, neither the role of Nikita Khrushchev nor any explanation of the underlying causes of the Cuban Missile Crisis appeared. The film takes a Washington-centric approach to the Missile Crisis, with all the information about the Soviet Union coming from conversations in the Kennedy administration, and after being told of the Soviet missile deployment, Kennedy says "Assuming for the moment that Khrushchev has not gone off the deep end and intends to start World War Three". This reaffirms the film's avoidance of the underlying causes of the crisis, which may disrupt the audience's understanding of the politics.

Secondly, *Thirteen Days* is an incomplete portrayal of Kennedy, with negative information about his political career and personal life being obscured. In terms of Kennedy's response to the missile crisis in real history, for the first three days of the crisis, Kennedy's thoughts had been biased towards launching air strikes against the Soviet Union (White, 2011, p. 145). In other words, it can be argued that the film's constant emphasis on the immorality of force and the seriousness of the consequences of nuclear war for Kennedy is a mythologisation of him rather than true history. Furthermore, Kennedy's chaotic private life was not a secret, but there is also no depiction of any of this in the film. This image construction can also be seen as a kind of nostalgia through the mythologising of Kennedy's image after his death, also leading to a cognitive bias for audiences.

## **2. Ideological Manipulation by the Dominant Class**

The ideological messages conveyed in the film may also lead to a form of ideological manipulation from the dominant class, placing the audiences in an imperceptibly passive position. To be more specific, Hollywood exists to legitimise the dominant institutions of the nation-state and its values (Scott, 2011, p. 31). Ostensibly, the views implied by the ideology in the film are generally neutral, whereas in reality, they serve the interests of the dominant class in the society (Haas, Terry, & Peter, 2015). As mentioned in the previous discussion, *Thirteen Days* hides Kennedy's attitude of having advocated air strikes in real history in its portrayal of his decision-making process, and repeatedly emphasises the supremacy of national security and world peace in the minds of government leaders, which reflects the fact that the film's ideology serves the dominant class. Through the delivery of this ideological message, it downplays the audience's and the US citizen's reflections and criticisms of the real government's decision-making.

### **The Global Cultural Impact of *Thirteen Days***

Hollywood films are not only being watched within the United States, but they are equally influential in the world. Firstly, Hollywood films are one of the mediums for spreading US culture and ideology to the

world (Maisuwong, 2012). Consequently, for global audiences, the *Thirteen Days* represents an export of US culture and values. For example, in the film plot in which Kennedy negotiates with the Soviet representative, Kennedy says, "We are a free society, Mr. Ambassador. We make our own decisions here in America" (Donaldson, 2000). This highly represents an emphasis on the dominant ideology of freedom in the US. Secondly, the *Thirteen Days* deepens the image of the United States as a superpower by presenting the US government's decisive action and leadership in the Cuban Missile Crisis, emphasising its leadership and influence in international affairs. Thirdly, the publication of *Thirteen Days* comes nearly 40 years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, which could lead to renewed interest and discussion of the historical events of the Cold War on a global scale. Art can shape thoughts and ideas in society (Scott, 2011, p. 18). Therefore, it can be considered that the *Thirteen Days* enhanced the audience's understanding and concern for international affairs and promoted international political discussions on major topics such as international relations and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Finally, globalisation has made films a worldwide product, and using the screen, they bring the world's audiences closer together (Maisuwong, 2012). Through the medium of film, global audiences can achieve a form of cross-cultural communication.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Thirteen Days* as a Hollywood political film exemplifies the role and lasting impact of political films in US politics through its gripping portrayal of the Cuban Missile Crisis. By analysing its narrative structure, the portrayal of key characters and ideological themes, it can be concluded that Hollywood political films have positive effects on the political culture of US society in terms of enhancing social-political understanding and participation, reinforcing political beliefs, and fostering social cohesion. Also, due to the selective presentation of information and government manipulation, there may be interference and negative effects on the audience's political perceptions. Additionally, based on the global prominence of Hollywood filmmaking, US political films also impact global culture.

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