

Episode 1: The Dead Presidents Club

Hey! Hi! Hello! Welcome back! I hope you've enjoyed this brief reprieve from the sound of my voice. I'm back behind the wheel... microphone... whatever now. I'm feeling very relaxed and refreshed after my break – by which I of course mean, it wasn't long enough, please don't make me go back to my day job, I'm begging you. But I imagine you're feeling similar, so we can get through this together by tuning out with some pop cultural thoughts. Some pop cultural boners if you will. I know that's the title of the podcast, but the idea of a brain boner is so gross, I'm sorry. Anyway, I did use my time off to do a little extra preparation for the podcast.

I was kind of chugging away at my laptop, trying to work out what would be an appropriate re-launch episode. I'm trying to do things that are a little more seasonal, a little more aligned to the year. But it's hard to both plan content in advance AND react to the world around you. Initially, the Grammys were going to have just happened so I was going to talk about the Grammys and the weirdness of awards shows in general. And then the Recording Academy postponed their goddamn ceremony. The audacity! I'd already written like 1000 words. But life comes at you fast.

2021 started with a bang... by which I of course mean, a small coup in Washington,

DC. Well... I mean... "coup" is being generous, particularly to a country whose insistence on world domination means that their secret service has been responsible for most actual coups world-over, resulting in decades of political instability, violence and poverty in several large geographic regions. So, I'm not going to say coup – I'm going to say bizarre, white supremacist temper tantrum, with guns.

You're hearing this in February – so allow me to refresh your memory briefly. The US Congress was about to affirm the President-elect Joe Biden's Electoral College victory over President Donald Trump, when it was violently interrupted by a group of domestic terrorists, and we got to watch it unfold in real time because that's just what the world is now. It's been a little bit weird to watch, to be honest with you. The Capitol was stormed. A country who cannot let you get through an airport without making you squat and cough in case you've got a bomb or an open water bottle stored in your asshole was very briefly derailed by a bunch of folks who think that Trump has been sent by God to save America. Anyway, in the spirit of responding to the world around me, I started thinking about American presidents on screen. Hollywood loves to drown New York in fire and flood, but it also really, really loves a high stakes political hostage

situation. With that in mind...

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition – and today, I'm thinking about American presidential portrayals.

I'm not gonna lie to you – I really wanted that line to be "...and today I'm thinking about kidnapping the president!" But I didn't want to end up on some sort of watch list, so you get the less fun introduction. Anyway, I started thinking about American presidents on screen because I was thinking about the fanatical devotion of Trump supporters and his status as a cultish figure. I think there's a huge disconnect between that kind of devotion and politics in a lot of other places in the world. And I realise that the last four years has been a bit of a different ride than usual, but like I was trying in picture a scenario in which an Australian with a 'ScoMo will save us!' flag storms the gates of Australian parliament with the sincere belief that our prime minister is secretly hunting a global cabal of paedophiles, and I just couldn't get there. At all.

That's not a judgement call on our politics really – I don't want to be that guy who looks at America burning itself to the ground and gets all smug and superior. Australia is still its own special kind of racist hellscape, we've been extremely complacent in the rise of an ultra-conservative right wing and there's definitely a small but noisy contingent of QAnon people here. But I think there's enough of a cultural difference that you'd have a fairly hard time convincing people to travel to Canberra, let alone storm parliament house.

I mean, obviously, no one is under any illusions about the amount of power the Australian Prime Minister holds in a global setting (except ScoMo himself maybe – trade war with China, anyone?). Our politicians are not really global figureheads. I'm willing to bet that my small contingent of international listeners couldn't name our PM off the top of their heads and are wondering what the fuck a ScoMo is. In contrast, after years of US cultural imperialism, people unironically refer to the US president as the Leader of the Free World. Which is probably why Hollywood movies are so fixated on blowing the president up. Or trying to anyway.

Where Australian dramatizations of political offices usually focus on someone boinking a staffer or not being nice enough to the Queen, American depictions of the president and cabinet run the full gambit. From hero president who saves the whole of planet earth from aliens/meteors/tidal waves, to hero president who is beaten viciously by terrorists but still refuses to give up the nuclear codes, to hero president who just wants to be a normal guy looking for love. Hollywood has them all!

So, I thought today we could have a look at these fictional representations – not the biographical period pieces, because we already know history is written by the winner – but I thought we could mull over what they have in common, what they don't and what impact years of being drip-fed American cinematic propaganda has had on our perception of reality. Ok, so let's start off with a little bit of history, because I think it's interesting and I think it goes some way to explaining

why American cinema is Like That. Much of this summation is pulled from a three-part series on CBC Radio called Myths Onscreen: Hollywood at War, which is a great listen and I highly recommend. In the lead up to America's entry into the Second World War, the American military enlisted Hollywood to help drum up some good patriotic feeling. The U.S Office of War Information created the Bureau of Motion Pictures, which was responsible for reviewing scripts and revising those that were seen to portray the U.S. and particularly the U.S. war effort in an unfavourable light. Between 1942 and 1945, the Bureau reviewed over 1600 scripts and had the final say most of them. But this military relationship to Hollywood didn't end with the Second World War, and when the U.S. became involved in later conflicts, like Vietnam, Hollywood continued to play a pivotal role in generating sufficient public support to at least warrant entry into war, even if it couldn't sustain public support.

Then when Hollywood started depicting broken men in a post-Vietnam world, the Department of Defence had to change tact. They had to start making movies that glorified the military without explicitly being 'war movies' (where people had the chance to be starred emotionally). This is where you get films like Top Gun, which is about the military structure and uses actual naval bases and officers as extras, but is mostly about teamwork, friendship and gay beach volleyball scenes between Val Kilmer and Tom Cruise. It was so successful as a piece of propaganda, Navy recruiters set up shop outside cinemas where it was showing, and enlistment reportedly increased 500%. This success meant that the face

of propaganda evolved – from grand military heroism to a more abstracted version of military might, through either things in a Top Gun vein, or through more fantastical, sci-fi type hits like Independence Day. Tanner Mirrlees, an associate professor of communications and digital media at Ontario Tech University, speaking to CBC radio says, "No country in the world churns out as many images of itself as the military hero... like the United States does. That is a unique cultural phenomenon."

As someone who is a fan of big stupid action films, I often find myself having to take even the better ones, with a grain of salt. Or like... a pinch of salt. Sometimes an entire salt shaker, to be honest with you. This isn't subtle pro-American sentiment. Like even when The Rock is playing a search and rescue helicopter pilot, he's got a combat veteran back story. Yes, it's episode one and we're back on The Rock as an example, you know who I am as a person. Anyway, it's all about as subtle as a brick to the face. So, what does this fixation on military heroism have to do with American presidents? I mean, the most obvious answer is that the President is the Commander in Chief of the United States Army, Navy and Air Force, which makes him a kind of symbolic figure anyway – meaning any subtle military propaganda that's produced is ultimately feeding in to the glorification of the Office of the President anyway, regardless of whether he appears in the film or not. But when an American president appears on screen, particularly in an action film kind of setting, you're often seeing film makers walk a really fine line between showing the president as a heroic, noble and

capable public official, and still allowing him to be saved by the kinds of armed forces the propaganda machine is trying to glorify and recruit.

I watched a few different films to get a sense of what a fictional president looks like through the Hollywood lens. On the action movie front, I watched *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down*, both from 2013, and which are basically the same movie in a kind of *Friends With Benefits/ No Strings Attached* situation, but with exploding Whitehouses. I also watched *Independence Day*, *Air Force One* and *Deep Impact*, which are from 1996, 97, and 98 respectively. On the non-action front, I watched *The American President*, which is a 1995 Sorkin-penned romance about an environmental lobbyist dating the president. I chose these because they're all fairly well known, and they give us a nice snapshot of what the US wanted from a president in the 1990s, and then again for where we were at in the Obama years.

These films take a couple of different approaches to presidential prestige but they all have a few things in common. For one thing, each of these Presidents is a likeable guy. And obviously he has to be – if he's going to be worth saving or romancing then he has to be good. But the thing I think is kind of funny is that all of these films define likeable in the same way. Every single film I watched has long single take that follows the president through his morning routine, which usually includes being handed pieces of paper, thanking everyone from presidential aides to the gardeners by name and moving around schedules to make sure there's adequate family time. The type of president shifts – Jamie Foxx

in *White House Down* for example, is a radical anti-war, anti-poverty president, whereas Aaron Eckhart in *Olympus Has Fallen* seems to be running on a pretty conservative pro-freedom platform (whatever that means). But both of them love their wives and children, and remember their staff member's names and hobbies and shake hands with the janitor on the way into work as they sip their morning coffee. Harrison Ford in *Air Force One* has an entire bit where all the members of the Secret Services and stewards on the plane keep accidentally spoiling the NFL game outcome for him because they're excited his team won, and they get to share that with him.

I know this is a pretty common trope in a lot of films that are trying to set up powerful men as likeable, but it feels kind of pointed when it's about the President of the United States. I think specifically because it seems to be based around this idea that the reverence all those aides, gardeners, janitors, pilots and captains hold for the office is reciprocated by the President towards this concept of "we the people" that's contained in those diverse, common person jobs. One of the ways these films reinforce this idea is by having a character make an "I voted for the other guy" joke, while putting their body on the line to protect the president. So as Channing Tatum slots his body in between a hail of white supremacist bullets to protect Jamie Foxx, he's doing so not because he likes the presidential politics, but out of duty to and respect for what the President represents. And in return, he gets a president who is willing to Do The Right Thing, whatever that may be.

Interestingly, not a lot of these films confirm which party the president belongs to, with the exception of *The American President*, which explicitly lays out a Democratic president and shows some underhanded Republican dealings. But in fairness, the off-cuts of that script were later turned into the ultimate political drama – *The West Wing* – and as such, it's taking itself a lot more seriously than a string of films where the Whitehouse is blown up a hundred different ways. I think, particularly as we move into the 2010s, keeping the party out of it is a pretty conscious decision so as not to alienate half the voting population from the film. Because as much as the Likeable Guy trope is designed to instil a sense of reverence for the Commander in Chief, realistically politics in the US is a partisan game, and that's only been getting worse as we move through the decades. Having a bunch of different presidents making tough but fair calls without any real political alignment is lets the military propagand machine keep ticking over without too much commitment.

One thing I noticed about a couple of these presidents, particularly in the 1990s, is that they're explicitly stated as having combat experience in one of America's many and varied war efforts. In *Air Force One*, Harrison Ford is a Vietnam vet with a Medal of Honour. Bill Pullman's president in *Independence Day* was an F-16 fighter pilot in the Gulf War. I was curious about the percentage of American presidents who were veterans – it's 26 out of 45 in case you were wondering, including service in State militias, and many of them didn't see combat, particularly in later years. The last one who actually saw combat was George H. W. Bush in

World War II. No president saw combat in Vietnam or the Gulf War.

The fixation on having a war hero president seems to be part narrative device, part attempt to set the president up as ready to serve his country. In *Independence Day*, for example, at least some of the central tension of the film is the discomfort of the President settling into his role of not being on the frontlines. And when he's presented with an opportunity to throw himself into the line of fire, he does so gladly. Harrison Ford's president is the same in *Air Force One*, and in doing so he ultimately sacrifices a bunch of Whitehouse staffers in order to punch communist Gary Oldman in the throat, none of which is ever portrayed as anything other than heroic. Despite not being an accurate depiction of the office, the desire for a veteran president hones in on some of the tension that I mentioned earlier. Films without a veteran president have to spend more time setting up the fact that these are both tough guys, but worth saving when their toughness fails. They're boxers or able to shoot guns. Morgan Freeman in *Deep Impact* is just sort of blessed with authoritative voice, and therefore is allowed to do whatever he wants – but given that he's facing a natural disaster rather than an assassination attempt, he doesn't have to throw punches really. There's a desire for presidential heroics and masculinity that is almost at odds with the need to be saved by the average joes who are also craving their moment of American exceptionalism.

What does all of that mean when the Capitol is being stormed in real life, then? Obviously, I can only really talk about

this from an Australian perspective, but as I was watching a bunch of guys walk around with MAGA hats stealing mail from Nancy Pelosi's office I had a lot of difficulty reconciling what I was seeing on screen. And I couldn't really work out why – I mean, civil unrest happens all the time all over the world for lots of different reasons. Sometimes literally because the US can't keep its hands to itself. But I think, after watching all these films back-to-back, I've sort of nailed the feeling down.

I'm not sure if you've ever heard of Paris Syndrome – it's specific to Japanese travellers who visit Paris. The idea is that the expectation set by the media portraying Paris as this kind of hub of romance and culture isn't met by the city itself, and it causes this break in reality for tourists who are sent in to this deep depression. This feels a little bit the same – not in the sense that I'm depressed (I am depressed, but that's totally clinical and unrelated to the guy shirtless QAnon guy). More in the sense that the rest of the world sees a lot of America filtered through a pop cultural lens. And for the most part – America is those things. Like... it has weird little cowboy towns. And actual cowboys! And colleges known for partying and fraternities rather than just like... going to uni. I know at least one person who swears they met the devil in Georgia, just like in the song. In lots of ways, going to America is kind of the opposite of Paris Syndrome, where it's almost entering an uncanny valley of being too exact. These people just exist, and they unironically think that America is the greatest nation on earth.

So, with that in mind, when you're used

to seeing Hollywood movies literally backed by the American military where there's this triumphant defence of the Whitehouse that's also symbolic of like America's superiority and freedom, and what you actually get is people walking through the front door with almost no resistance, it's such an odd kind of disconnect. It's not that I'm hoping these people would get blitzed by some Channing Tatum action guy with a machine gun. I just wonder, if it's weird for me – a 30 year old Australian who just likes movies too much – what's it feel like for people who have been slowly drip fed that propaganda and have just uncritically absorbed it their whole lives?

Well, that was episode one! I know I mentioned that White House Down and Olympus Has Fallen are essentially the same film – for what it's worth, if you're going to pick one to watch it should be White House Down. The terrorists in Olympus Has Fallen all have great hair and frankly, are kind of right, which is the opposite of what you want from people trying to nuke America. If you've got any thoughts on the state of American politics, please don't share them with me. I'm so tired. But if you've ever seen the devil in Georgia, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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