

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Road to Perdition*]

An Average Hitman

By Steve Sailer

"ROAD TO PERDITION" is out this week on DVD and VHS. It made \$104 million at the domestic box office and received six Oscar nominations, one for supporting actor Paul Newman and the rest in craft categories. The nomination of Thomas Newman (no relation to Paul) for Best Original Score is the 79th nomination earned by the Newman clan of composers, the Bachs of Hollywood. Despite its technical excellence, "Road to Perdition" missed out on any Oscar nods in the Big Three categories of Picture, Director, or Actor.

Over the last decade, Tom Hanks's batting average at choosing strong projects has been as high as any actor's ever. He stars in movies that are often innovative, well made, and always popular. His talismanic prestige drew tremendous talent to this solemn, slow-moving story of a soulful hitman who works for the Downstate Illinois Irish mob in 1931.

The sterling supporting cast includes Paul Newman as his conflicted boss who must choose between betraying his beloved protégé (Hanks) or his own rotten son (Daniel Craig). Stanley Tucci is superbly suave as Al Capone's lieutenant Frank Nitti, to whom both gangsters turn for help. The normally fascinating Jennifer Jason Leigh has a negligible part. And Jude Law overplays "The Reporter," an evil assassin dispatched to murder Hanks's noble assassin.

Visually gifted director Sam Mendes is back following his Oscar-winning debut "American Beauty." The late cameraman Conrad L. Hall's sumptuous cinematography garnered him his 10th Oscar nomination. Their painterly tableaux are memorable, yet static, as if they were filming each panel in a comic book.

The wintry darkness of the first hour will remind you of how discouraging the Depression was. Fortunately, the sun comes out as Hanks and his son flee for weeks toward Perdition, teaching each other the usual Important Life Lessons as they bond along the way. This metaphorical town's setting amidst the glorious Sleeping Bear sand dunes on Michigan's west coast makes for a striking climax.

Yet nothing demonstrates the geekification of American culture more than that all these master craftsmen assembled to make what turns out to be another comic book flick. To be precise, "Perdition" is based on long-time "Dick Tracy" writer Max Allan Collins's "graphic novel," a term that means "a long, pretentious, and expensive comic book."

"Perdition" has the same old illogical plotting, countless killings, absence of real women, passionate but puerile psychology, and a lack of sociological insight that you expect from a comic book aimed at youths.

You would appreciate the film's numerous pleasures more if you know ahead of time that "Road to Perdition" is fundamentally absurd.

For instance, Hanks wants to find and kill the man who shot up his family, but Capone's gang is hiding him. So our hero devises the brilliant plan of persuading the Chicago Outfit to see his side of the issue by repeatedly stealing Al Capone's money. Warning: Kids, the Chicago mob might not be in its prime anymore, but, still, do not try this in Illinois.

Also, Law's character, the reporter, is a psycho supervillain straight out of "Batman." He shoots people with his gun, then with his camera, and sells the gory crime scene pictures to the tabloids.

Hanks's normal on-screen persona as an average American Joe, who succeeds by drawing on reserves of character he did not know he had, is intimately connected to his inspiring real-life growth from just another funnyman to perhaps Hollywood's finest citizen, a champion of the bourgeois virtues. For example, he sacrificed tens of millions of dollars in acting salaries to oversee his two patriotic mini-series "From the Earth to the Moon" and "Band of Brothers."

Hanks is a classic baby boomer turned father, one who feels guilty over letting his career come before the two kids he had with his first wife. So he is working extra hard to raise his two younger children right. You can see the emotional appeal of the role to Hanks. He plays a sober, hard-working, faithful husband and provider. His biggest sin (well, except for murdering people) is being a little emotionally withdrawn around his sons. In a touching scene, no doubt straight out of the star's own current home life, but anachronistic for his character's, he apologizes to his nine-year-old for having to miss his school concert.

Unfortunately, the family man elements that attracted Hanks make his character ludicrous. My part-Irish wife grew up on Chicago's West Side. She laughed at the depiction of the Irish hitman's family life as fond but overly formal: "Don't you think that a devout Irish Catholic father who is also a contract killer might drink a little more?" ■

Rated R for violence and bad words.

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BOOKS

[*The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, David Frum, Random House, 303 pages]

Axis of Ego

By Robert D. Novak

EYEBROWS WERE RAISED in Washington at the beginning of George W. Bush's administration when a prominent Canadian journalist named David Frum was hired as bottom banana on the new president's speechwriting team. The reason for that surprise is supplied by Frum himself in *The Right Man*.

When chief Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson first made his offer, Frum writes, "I believed I was unsuited to the job he was offering me. I had no connection to the Bush campaign or the Bush family. I had no experience in government and little of political campaigns. I had not written a speech for anyone other than myself. And I had been only a moderately enthusiastic supporter of George W. Bush ... I strongly doubted he was the right man for the job."

What's more, as Frum explains, "I was a Canadian citizen when I entered the White House." Nor did he represent any wing of the Republican Party. While identifying himself as a conservative, his first book, *Dead Right* (1994), expressed intense dissatisfaction with supply-siders, evangelicals, and nearly all Republican politicians. He had first attracted major American attention in 1991 with a mean-spirited, unjustified accusation of Pat Buchanan practicing "sly anti-Semitism."

In a White House unusually suspicious of outsiders, Gerson ushered in Frum apparently because he regarded him as an insightful intellectual (M.A. Yale, J.D. Harvard) and a stylish writer.

As Frum tells it, he felt that "if only for a little while, I would like to look out from the inside."

But not for too long. He was gone in 13 months, soon after Bush's war against terrorism was launched. It took only six more months to grind out the book, and it was in the bookstores by January. A public hungry to learn more about the president immediately propelled *The Right Man* to number two on the *New York Times* best-seller list, in no small part because Frum had won nationwide notoriety as the self-identified author of Bush's famous "axis of evil" formulation.

Did Frum enter the White House for the express purpose of writing this book, and did he help along that project by breaking the unwritten speechwriter's code of not advertising your work? That speculation is inescapable, but there is also reason for a darker thought about Frum's motives.

For much of this book, Frum seems disengaged from Bush's policies. He refers to the president's "energy plan fiasco," calling it "an incoherent mess" and a "pseudoscandal." He contends Bush "could never quite bring himself to deny that climate change was very likely real and man-made." He says of Bush's faith-based initiative, "instead of drawing new people to the Republican Party, it had repelled them." Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, writes Frum,

I began avoiding parties where I expected the questions [of Bush's capacity for the presidency] to be posed too persistently by conservative friends, for I was not sure I would know how to answer.

But after the terrorist attack on America, Frum sees Bush in a new light—as "the right man" to lead the nation. The sophisticated, detached journalist becomes the ardent advocate of carrying the war to Iraq and supporting Israel's position. The wisecracking outsider who belittles his White House colleagues becomes a fervent supporter of Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

While Frum calls himself "a not especially observant Jew," he repeatedly refers to his Jewishness. It is hard to recall any previous presidential aide so engrossed with his own ethnic roots. Frum is more uncompromising in support of Israel than any other issue, raising the inescapable question of whether this was the real reason he entered the White House.

This is a strange memoir in many ways. An aide just off the payroll and hungry for fame might be expected to "kiss and tell," but the truth is that Frum did precious little kissing there to tell about.

Senior colleagues say Frum had personal contact with Bush on no more than three or four occasions, and he does not seem to understand George W. Bush very well. Of a president who may be more basically conservative than Ronald Reagan, Frum writes, "He was not at all an ideological man." He contends Bush "does curiously resemble [John F.] Kennedy"; as someone who knew both, I can think of no two more dissimilar men.

Especially at the beginning, *The Right Man* reads more a Sunday newspaper feature than an insider's memoir—but written with a tone of condescension. "Conspicuous intelligence seemed actively unwelcome in the Bush White House," he writes, especially when compared with the Clinton White House.

Halfway through, the book takes a turn. "There was no domestic agenda" after the terrorist attacks, Frum writes, ignoring Bush's broad range of policy proposals. He also ignores the president's foreign policy positions. While Bush took a balanced view of Indian-Pakistani violence in the Kashmir, Frum writes, "The Indians showed amazing restraint in the face of Pakistani-based terror." While the official position praised Saudi support in the war on terrorism, Frum accused the kingdom of being determined to "incubate deranged fanatics bent on jihad."

Frum assails "foreign policy bureaucrats" in the State Department and CIA who were "most eager to appease the