

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*All the King's Men*]

Kingfish for a Day

By Steve Sailer

AT THE 2005 OSCARS, host Chris Rock asked, "Who is Jude Law? Why is he in every movie I have seen the last four years? Even the movies he's not acting in, if you look at the credits, he made cupcakes or something. He's gay, he's straight, he's American, he's British. Next year he's playing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar."

In response, an even more than usually pompous Sean Penn defended Law as "one of our finest actors." This ensured a slagging by film critics of the new version of "*All the King's Men*," in which Penn plays the Huey Long-inspired populist demagogue Willie Stark and Law his enervated aristocrat press secretary, Jack Burden, who can never quite decide whether that's a gleam or a glint in his boss' eye.

Surprisingly, after endless editing, "*All the King's Men*" turns out to be an intelligent, serious film with memorable dialogue, which writer-director Steven Zaillian (who wrote "*Schindler's List*") largely lifted straight from the book. The famous 1946 novel by poet Robert Penn Warren tends toward the lyrically overripe when Burden narrates but comes alive when Stark opens his mouth, furnishing as many superb lines as we're likely to hear in 2006.

While the new film is not as effective as the 1949 Best Picture version (with an Oscar-winning turn by Broderick Crawford), it is more artistically ambitious. Its flaws are frustratingly numerous but not fatal.

The critics are annoyed that Zaillian has made a Southern political movie that isn't a blatant allegory about George W. Bush or Bill Clinton or Hurricane Katrina. (The film does unintentionally offer insights into another oil-rich populist, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.) Instead, Zaillian sticks faithfully to the novel.

But what a true story Warren had to fictionalize! Huey Long was both the most manic dynamo in American politics since Teddy Roosevelt and a sardonic observer of his own confounding and increasingly sinister career. He rightly observed, "Listen, there are smarter guys than I am, but not in Louisiana."

When Long was elected governor in 1928, Louisiana had the second highest illiteracy rate in the nation and only 300 miles of paved road. In his heroic first two years in office, Long poured money into sensible investments in the state's under-utilized human and physical capital: free textbooks, adult literacy, hospitals, roads, and bridges.

To pay for them, he tried to tax Standard Oil, which "had enough money burn a wet mule," but he was impeached by the old guard. After narrowly surviving, he devoted the rest of his short life to waging war on his political enemies.

The only state that employs the Code Napoleon, Louisiana lacks what Alexander Hamilton praised as "that temperate love of liberty, so essential to real republicanism" more often found in states with an English political heritage. Even as Long grew bored with promoting their welfare, Louisiana's common folk

stood by him, allowing him to evolve into a democratic dictator with near absolute power.

In 1935, Long was assassinated by a well-bred young doctor for reasons that have never been conclusively explained. To make sense of the killer's motives, Warren invented a Southern Gothic subplot about an idealistic yet decadent coterie of the gentry who collide with the governor fatally. Warren imagined himself as Stark's right-hand man, Jack Burden, a former scholar who drowns his lyrical soul with bourbon to forget how his master bends him to his will. Burden's story eventually develops some genuinely tragic momentum, but the film inevitably ends up featuring less of the ferocious Penn and more of the merely adequate Law.

Zaillian blundered by slathering on the gloom from the opening frame, with a lighting scheme reminiscent of Tim Burton's grotesquely nocturnal "*Batman Returns*." James Horner's score is especially portentous. Instead, Zaillian should have played the first half of the story as a comic triumph, in the manner of "*The Man Who Would Be King*," only to turn tragic as Stark is corrupted absolutely.

You might as well wait, however, for the DVD so you can watch it with the subtitles turned on. The flamboyance of the dialogue combined with the all-star cast's various attempts at Louisiana accents render many lines incomprehensible. Oddly enough, the only actual Southerner, Patricia Clarkson, might be the most unintelligible. In contrast, Sir Anthony Hopkins, as always, makes no effort whatsoever to adapt his Old Vic diction to his American character and thus is, as always, perfectly understandable. ■

Rated PG-13.

BOOKS

[*Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World*, Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, Pantheon, 200 pages]

Reconnecting With the Reality-Based Community

By Scott McConnell

AT NO TIME since the Vietnam War has there has been greater domestic discontent with American foreign policy. Large numbers of voters tell pollsters they will vote primarily to express opposition to the Iraq War. Bookstore tables display scores of foreign-policy works. Political talking-head shows of every kind feature debates about America's stance in the world.

Yet paradoxically, this debate seems not to have reached the levels of real political power in Washington. Inside the Beltway, dissent over Iraq is usually framed as dissatisfaction with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's pre-war planning; if Hillary Clinton or a similarly tough-minded Democrat were in charge, preventive wars would be managed more carefully. The Democratic Leadership Council, perhaps the most important foreign-policy faction within the party, has rallied behind liberal hawks like Paul Berman and Peter Beinart, who prescribe policies not noticeably different from the neoconservative architects of the Iraq War.

Surveying this scene, one might conclude that there exists no alternative to the current consensus, or at least none beyond a Left whose critique of American power has been so constant and predictable since 1947 that it is easily passed over. (The semi-isolationist Old

Right is even less visible.) The political center of both parties not only accepts that preventive war against Muslim states should be central to America's strategy against terrorism, it embraces the corollary that the United States uniquely embodies a kind of absolute good in the world that other countries can't begin to match.

This last belief, which has both Christian and secular versions, makes it impossible for Americans to see themselves and their policies as others might see them, a prerequisite for competent diplomacy. It has now seeped into almost every foreign-policy area.

One typical example is cited in Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman's timely and important new book, *Ethical Realism*. Earlier this year a bipartisan task force chaired by John Edwards and Jack Kemp explored American relations with Russia. About one essential thing the class-warrior Democrat and *über*-free-marketeer Republican and the Russia experts they tapped were in complete agreement: American policies toward Russia have been entirely blameless during the 15 years since Gorbachev, and difficulties that have arisen in current relations are entirely the fault of Russia's leaders.

This sensibility, rather than specific misguided Bushian policies, is the main target of *Ethical Realism*. The authors resurrect and seek to revive an alternate philosophy—one radically different and

the stunningly successful American reconstruction of the West after World War II and led to victory over communism without a nuclear cataclysm—is about as far removed from today's Washington as the Han Dynasty.

The policies of the realists are familiar to most. Containment, set out in Kennan's famous "long telegram" of 1946, recast American establishment attitudes towards Stalin's Russia and became the lodestar for Washington's political and economic policies to block further communist advances. Containment always had its enemies on the Left and Right—those who didn't consider communism a threat and those who wanted Washington to press its nuclear advantage before the Russians caught up. Truman had to face down Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who wanted to use nuclear weapons against China during the Korean War. Once elected, Eisenhower had to marginalize the substantial "rollback" faction within the GOP. Pressed to use our nuclear advantage against Moscow, Ike asked, "What would we do with Russia if we should win a global war? ... The colossal job of occupying ... [it] would be far beyond the resources of the United States..."—the kind of question never considered by the current president.

Eisenhower's views were shaped by firsthand experience of war but indirectly by the ways the American establishment thought, which Lieven and Hulsman label

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yet seemingly close at hand—the kind of centrism embodied in the foreign-affairs leadership of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower and represented philosophically by such realists as diplomat George Kennan, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and scholar Hans Morgenthau. It is sad to recognize that this style of thinking about and acting in the world—one that guided

"ethical realism." Kennan outlined its diplomacy, but its ethical view came from Reinhold Niebuhr, the Midwesterner who became American Protestantism's leading theologian. Niebuhr was troubled about the messianic streak in the American consciousness and counseled listeners—who included much of the American political and journalistic establishment—